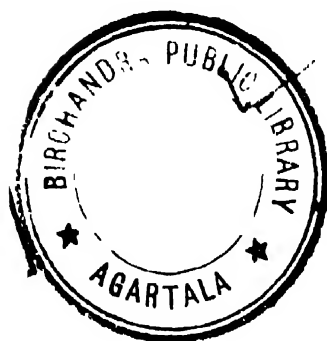


The Honourable Sword

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SHOUTS from a thousand throats rolled across the moat, through the open windows of the castle, and thudded against the ears of the kneeling warriors. Above the shouts came a single voice.

‘Send him out, Imiki! Send out your sword-maker, Soga! We would not have him perish in the flames of your castle. Do you hear, Imiki? This is Tokimasa, the head of the house of Hara, who has conquered you. Surrender Soga, the swordmaker, and prepare yourselves honourably for death!’

The words beat into the brain of the boy who knelt in front of the small, elaborate altar. Taro

lifted heavy-lidded eyes to look at his father kneeling beside him. Imiki's eyes were closed, his face pale, save for two flushed spots on his high cheekbones.'

'Honourable father,' began Taro timidly, for even a favourite son does not intrude upon the Daimio when he prays, 'honourable father, the enemy calls from across the moat. They will spare the life of the ancient Soga that he may continue to make his flawless swords. It is —' His voice dwindled away as his father slowly opened his eyes and looked down sombrely upon his son.

'I hear, my son. I have asked the worthy ancestors what I must do. To give my swordmaker into the hand of the enemy is a bitter taste in the mouth, but for him to perish —' Imiki rose from his knees in one swiftly supple motion, his heavy silk kimono falling sleekly about him. Instantly the room filled with clanking of swords and creaking of armour as the kneeling warriors also rose and faced their lord. The Daimio's black eyes roamed over them almost tenderly.

'Samurai,' he said, using the name that classed .



them as fearless fighting men, 'you have served the house of Yori well, but a stronger lord has conquered us and we must soon go to our ancestors. Now the victors make demands. Not to answer would leave us without honour. I will speak to the Daimio of the house of Hara.'

As though his words had been a signal, the voice called again. 'Imiki! What will you do? Our torches are ready; your castle will soon be in flames. Release Soga to us before it is too late!'

The Daimio's bare feet made no sound as he crossed the mat-covered floor. He took long, firm steps to the open window and leaned out toward the massed warriors silhouetted in flickering torchlight.

'Tokimasa-san, Imiki speaks to you. You have conquered my house and we are at your mercy. But I no longer command my retainers. It is Soga-san who must make the decision!'

A jeering laugh broke through the howl of protests from enemy throats. 'There is no decision to make — for you or Soga! It is my command! See, our torches burn. There will be no time for an honourable death by your own swords, only agony in the fire if the swordmaker is not released to us. *That* is the only decision you can make, Imiki of Yori!'

Taro felt a mounting sickness as he heard those words. The son of a Daimio grew up knowing that death by the sword was the noblest of deaths, but to die in flames . . . What would his father do?

Imiki listened to the ultimatum, then deliberately turned his back to the open window. His

hands were tucked into the sleeves of his kimono, and he stood like a statue, moving only his head to nod toward a servant crouching in the doorway.

‘Ask Soga-san to be good enough to come,’ he directed. The servant bowed low and scurried away.

The room was quiet; even the clamour outside had dropped to a low rumble as the Samurai, alertly watchful, never took their eyes from their master. He remained motionless, apparently unmindful of the target the golden crest on his black kimono made for the bows and arrows in the courtyard below.

The sliding door opened; the servant entered and dropped to his knees, touching his forehead to the floor.

‘Soga-san comes,’ he announced.

An old, old man appeared in the doorway. He leaned on a staff, but there was a youthful glint in his black eyes, and his snowy beard was carefully trimmed and combed. The crest embroidered on his brown kimono was the same as the Daimio’s.



Soga hobbled forward, stopped a few feet from the Daimio and bowed as low as age and staff would allow. Imiki also bowed.

'Sensei,' he said, giving the old swordmaker the title of beloved and respected teacher, 'you must know why I have sent for you.'

Again Soga bowed. 'I know, my lord.'

'Your life will be spared, Sensei, if you will go to the house of Hara.'

'My lord, there is little life left in me. My ancestors await in the tombs of the house of Yori; we have served it faithfully for many generations. For a few brief hours of life should I destroy that faith?'

'Thank you, Sensei. I promise you a quick death by the sword before the flames reach us.' He made a motion to turn toward the window, but was stopped by the urgent voice of Soga.

'One moment, my lord. There is one request I would make.'

'Make it, Sensei.'

'It is this: though I would not be swordmaker for the house of Hara, neither is it my desire that the swords of my ancestors and myself be de-

stroyed in the flames. Perhaps as a substitute for my humble self Tokimasa-san will accept the sword's of the house of Yori. Especially the Most Honourable Sword, Amakuni-maru, forged by my revered ancestor.'

A gasp went around the room at the mention of that famous sword, supposedly the most beautiful in Nippon. That Soga was willing that the enemy should come into possession of it rather than have it destroyed spoke of the reverence in which he held the sword.

Swordmaking ranked high among the highest of the arts in Nippon. Family secrets on tempering and forging were passed from one generation to another; sons longed for the day when they might wear the family treasure, and daughters were proud when the dowry they took to their husbands was an honoured sword.

Not all swords were meant for killing, though their polished blades were of the keenest and their points the sharpest. It was in the purity of the steel, the fineness of the workmanship that men saw the unobtainable in life and worshipped it.

Such a blade was the Honoured Sword, Amakuni-maru.

Imiki had not answered the old swordmaker. Now, heavily, hopelessly, he turned back to the window. But he raised his voice strongly to carry across the moat.

'Tokimasa-san! Our decision is made. It is not the wish of Soga-san to make swords for you. But together we honour you more. We are soon to die. The house of Yori has many excellent swords created by Soga-san and his family for generations. These we are loath to have destroyed by fire, not so much because they are personal possessions as because they are part of the heritage of Nippon itself. I will die content if you will stop your attack for a short while so I may have the swords sent out and presented to you.'

Raucous shouts greeted the first part of the speech, then fell away to silence. After a long wait the voice of Tokimasa was heard, sounding a little less belligerent than before.

'What about Amakuni-maru?' he shouted. 'Do you send it also?'

'It is included.'

'Good. The torches will not be placed to the castle until the exchange is made. See there is no delay!'

Taro's eyes turned toward a huge black and gold lacquered cabinet standing at the far side of the room. In it, he knew, were the heirloom swords of Yori. They lay wrapped in silk to guard against rust and dirt and were taken out only to be worn by the Daimio and his nobles on days of great significance, or simply to be admired by the family and honoured guests.

Now the Daimio took a place in front of the chest and motioned Taro and Soga to either side of him. They sank to the floor, resting on their heels in the customary fashion. Swords clanked as the Samurai seated themselves against the wall.

A servant scuttled from the room, to appear again carrying a large quilt which was spread on the floor. Other servants opened the doors of the chest, disclosing three drawers. From the top two they removed long, silk-wrapped bundles and held them one at a time toward the Daimio. With brief nods he indicated the quilt; the servants placed each wrapped sword on it. 'Then the third



drawer was opened and the servant brought out a long roll of scarlet silk, tied with a gold cord, heavy with tassels. He extended it on outstretched arms toward the Daimio. Iniki motioned that it be placed on a mat before him and be unwrapped.

No matter how many times Taro saw Amakunimaru his heart always beat a little faster. Now that he knew he was seeing it for the last time he was almost breathless.

It lay before his father, still sheathed. The black lacquered scabbard glistened, and above it

the handle's purple and gold braid glowed richly in the pale light.

Imiki picked up the sheathed blade to hold it aloft in both hands. He inclined his head toward the sword. Taro, Soga and the Samurai also bowed to the Honourable Sword. Then, with the cutting edge of the blade turned upward, the Daimio slowly unsheathed it.

Like a mirror in the sun, the highly polished blade caught the light as he held it at arm's length for all to gaze upon. He turned it slowly and the silver-white streak on the cutting edge of the perfectly tempered blade flashed. The Daimio lowered it that he might examine it more closely. He must cover his hand, Taro knew, because moisture or traces of salt would cause the blade to rust in a short time.

Then Amakuni-maru was passed from hand to hand, always upright, with the cutting edge toward the passer. Appreciative eyes glowed at the fineness of the sword's edge, the depth of polish, the delicacy of the designs — cherry blossoms, flowing streams and flashes of lightning — that were etched on the blade.

Once more the sword was in the Daimio's hands. Carefully he replaced it in the scabbard, cutting edge still upward so the weight of the blade would not cut the sheath. He handed it to a servant who wrapped it in a plain cloth. It would not go to Hara in the scarlet and gold colours of Yori. It was placed in the centre of the quilt. Deftly the quilt was folded over the swords, tied securely and carried to the window.

The Daimio followed briskly.

'Tokimasa-san! We are lowering the swords. Receive them gently, treat them kindly. The curses of a thousand ancestors be on your head should harm come to them!'

'Have no fear, O Conquered One!' laughed the voice of Tokimasa. 'I shall guard them with my life — more successfully, I hope, than you have done! Send them down.'

Gently the precious bundle was lowered and received by eager hands of the enemy Samurai.

'Be ready, house of Yori! We shall see these to a place of safety and return. Be ready to greet thy ancestors!'

Taro turned from the window to look at his

father. There was no place for fear in the heart of a Daimio's son, but suddenly life seemed a precious thing to keep . . . What was his father saying . . . ?

' . . . it is my will the house of Yori shall not die out. You, my son, must escape. You must make your way to the castle of the all-powerful Shogun Iyeyasu in Edo. He has long been our friend and will give you support when you revenge our family's honour. Go, Taro-chan.' He allowed his tone to soften as he said the endearing name. 'Go forward as the head of the house of Yori.'

An approving growl swept through the attendant Samurai, like a blessing on their young master.

Taro's heart rebelled. No! he wanted to shout, I will not be sent away! I am not afraid to meet death with the rest of you. Let me stay! But he could say nothing. He was the Daimio's son.

An upsweeping of noise from the outside, a flare of torches, a thud as something banged against the wooden walls of the castle!

'Hurry!' commanded his father. 'Lose no

time! Go to the underground storehouse. There you will find a hidden passage — a drain only a boy can pass through. It will take you beneath the moat to the safety of the woods.' The Daimio looked deep into his son's eyes. 'The light of our ancestors go with you, my son!'

Taro was fairly pushed through the door. In the narrow hallway the old swordmaker stopped him.

'Go to the White Waterfall,' he said in his old man's voice. 'You will not be alone. Hurry!' There was no time for further explanation, for there was a crackling of flames, and another thud, and Soga shoved the boy with surprising strength. 'Go quickly!'

Taro had one last glimpse into the room he had just left. His father stood in front of the family altar, surrounded by his Samurai.

Each man had an unsheathed sword in his hand.



THE SLIDING DOOR closed behind him and Taro blindly turned away.

‘Taro-chan, come quickly!’ It was his mother calling from a doorway down the hall. Everyone was telling him to come — or go — quickly! But perhaps his mother would say he did not have to go. Often she overruled his father in family matters. Perhaps this was one of the times. He ran forward.

Inside the room he started to bow to the noblewomen who attended his mother.

'My son,' she cautioned, 'this is a time when manners must wait. Come.' She led him to an inner room. 'Take off your clothes,' she directed. 'One who travels in secret must not wear the kimono of the house of Yori. These peasant garments will serve you better.'

So she, too, was making him go.

'O-fukuro,' he began, using the affectionate name for mothers, 'I do not want to leave.'

She remained placid. Her face, thought Taro, is like a mask the players sometimes wear. There was no expression in her voice when she spoke.

'The world would be very bright if we did only what we want. Come, into these.' She held out a pair of baggy trousers, and, taking the kimono he discarded, she smoothed it into proper folds. Then she picked up something from the floor. 'It will not be strange for a wandering peasant to carry a tinderbox,' she said. 'You will need warmth at night and fire to cook your food.'

Taro mutely put the tinderbox inside his blouse. Then his eyes widened as she drew from her obi the short sword it was the custom for ladies of rank to carry.

'It is not a warrior's sword,' she said in almost a whisper, 'but that will come later. It is one of Soga's blades, pure, faultless and strong. Three virtues desirable in blades and men. Take it, my son. May it guard you well.'

Her beautiful face remained calm, but her hands shook as she gave the sword to Taro. 'Carry it hidden. A peasant would not have a noble sword.' She rose to her feet. 'Now, come —'

She slid open the door to the anteroom where the ladies still waited, and fell back gasping. Blue smoke swirled about the room, flinging out writhing arms that choked the ladies crouching on the floor, holding their sleeves against their mouths.

'Hurry! Hurry!' Taro's mother ran to the hall door and shoved it open. 'The castle is burning! Go to the secret passage in the storeroom! Once outside go to the White Waterfall, then to the castle of the Shogun Iyeyasu. Go . . . Taro-chan!'

'Mother, come with me! You can be safe too . . .'

'Run! Do not delay! The flames leap high! Goodbye, my son!'

The pale, masklike face withdrew into the room and the door closed softly.

For a moment Taro's impulse was to leap forward, to claw open the door, to beat at it and push through the smoke, to defy the orders of his father and mother. But he had been taught to obey.

He ran down the smoky corridor to an open trap door in the floor. Now in utter darkness his feet groped until they found the ladder. Down and down he went, and a dank, damp odour filled his nostrils. At the bottom there was the palest flicker of light from a candle burned to a mere stub. Had it been placed there just for him? Quickly he looked around and saw a small opening low down in the wall. He had never known it was there.

His courage nearly failed as he stooped to enter the hole. So dark! So small! Then from above was a sound like a muffled explosion. Was the castle falling so soon? He dropped to his knees and started in.

Slime made the sides greasy to the touch, and the roughness of the tiles cut his knees and hands.

Every noise was a hollow sound, perhaps because he was under the moat.

It began to grow lighter, and suddenly there was blue sky and green grass and tall trees. He slipped his feet into the straw sandals he had fastened around his neck, and ran.

The White Waterfall. He knew it well; a craggy place where the mountain stream tumbled over rock, turning crystal-clear water into boiling, leaping foam.

“You will not be alone,” the old swordmaker had said. But who would be there? Who would be left? Terror took possession as he thought of what was happening back at the castle. He ran faster, dodging between massive trees and evading grasping tendrils of underbrush.

There was the river. There was the wide sweeping bend, and there was the White Waterfall. But no person was there. Soga had said —

‘Psst! Taro! I thought you would never come!’

‘Yoichi! Where are you?’ The sound of his friend’s voice sent his spirits soaring.

‘Over here. Come across on the stones.’

Taro saw a round-faced boy about his own age

on the other bank a short distance¹ above the falls. He was sitting on the last of a series of stones that formed a path across the river. A difficult path for some, but easy for boys who leaped over the stones like frogs. Taro removed his sandals and thought how much easier it was to move in his peasant's clothes than in his own. Yoichi, he noted, was dressed in the same kind of baggy trousers and shapeless blouse.

Jumping, teetering, gauging the distance, jumping again and finally springing to the spongy bank, Taro grasped the hand of his friend, who pulled him into the tall grass.

'What are you doing here, Yoichi? I thought you would be at — at the castle. I thought you would be with Soga-sensei.'

'He sent me away. He said I should escape. For three days he has been giving me the secrets of his family — only it is my family now.'

'What do you mean? You are his apprentice swordmaker, and you have a family already. How could you belong to Soga-san's family?'

'It was a great honour to my family that he should wish to adopt me. The art of swordmaking

is in my fingers, he said, and in my heart. Because he was old he had been teaching me many things. When the siege began he said I should be his son and know all his secrets. Then — to-day — he made me run from the castle. He said I should come to the White Waterfall, that you would be here—'

'Did you go through the underground drain?'

'Yes.'

'Did Soga tell you we were to go to Edo to the Shogun Iyeyasu and that we should revenge my family's honour?'

'He said we should go to the Shogun and I should make swords for him. He said—Oh, Taro, did they take it? Did they take Amakuni-maru?' Yoichi, the apprentice, leaned forward beseechingly. 'Did they, Taro?'

The boy nodded. 'It belongs to the house of Hara now.'

Yoichi's eyes narrowed to mere slits. 'I will get it back,' he whispered, 'if it should take the last breath of life. I will see Amakuni-maru restored to the house of Yori. Will you help, Taro?'

'I promise,' he answered, 'because *I* am the

house of Yori now, and I too have a pledge. Revenge for my family.'

The two boys looked at each other intently. Each knew what the other was thinking. 'We must take a blood oath,' they said, almost together.

'But how,' asked Yoichi, 'we have no knife. Perhaps a scratch with a twig —'

'Look.' Taro reached inside his waistband. 'My mother's sword. It is fitting we make the cuts with this.'

Yoichi gazed at the beautiful short sword that Taro drew respectfully from its lacquered case. The slightly curved blade glowed as brightly as the gold and silver mountings on the hilt, surrounding a cluster of lotus flowers, delicately carved in coral. 'Yes,' he breathed, 'with one of Soga-san's swords we cannot fail.' He held out his arm. 'Cut quickly, Taro.'

The razor-fine blade dropped lightly on the forearm of the swordmaker's apprentice and in its wake was a thin trickle of blood.

'I swear to redeem the Amakuni-maru and to avenge the honour of the house of Yori.'

Yoichi took the blade from Taro who uncovered his arm.

'I swear to avenge the honour of my father's house, and to regain possession of Amakuni-maru.'

Taro replaced the sword and rolled his sleeve down. 'Now we must plan,' he said. 'We must find out where the sword is kept and plan some way to get it.'

'Perhaps if we follow Tokimasa on his return to his castle we could get into camp some night —'

'Amakuni-maru will be well guarded while they travel, but —'

'Taro! Look, over the tops of the trees!'

Great puffs of smoke formed black clouds above the tallest trees, darkening the sun. Then the clouds shattered, sparks and black ash swirled skyward, and the ground shook with a dull thud.

Without knowing exactly why, both boys began to run back toward the castle. Although they were on the opposite side of the river, they soon came to a spot where the view was unobstructed.



Sheltered behind large trees they stared in awed disbelief. The once proud castle of Yori was a heap of rubble. The outbuildings were gone, and the stables still flamed. Frightened horses snorted

and rolled their eyes from places of safety in the enemy camp. The moat was full of debris, some of it still steaming and hissing in the sluggish water.

There was tumult in Hara's camp. Triumphant shouts and cheers rose shrilly; jubilant men capered and waved their swords.

'Look, Yoichi, near the large white tent!' Taro nudged his companion.

The purple and scarlet emblem of the Daimio of Hara waved from the peak of the tent that stood at the edge of the encampment. The boys could distinguish the Daimio heading a group of armoured Samurai. Before them, stiffly erect, was a boy not much older than Taro and Yoichi.

'It is Hajime, the Daimio's first son,' said Taro, speaking in an unnecessary whisper. 'But what is the ceremony about?'

Then, suddenly, they both knew. A warrior approached the Daimio, holding a sword on outstretched arms. Tokimasa took it and held it upright in front of him. The warrior withdrew. The Daimio spoke, but the words did not carry across the river. Then the boy Hajime bowed

deeply and took the sword from his father. He too spoke, holding the sword aloft so that its rich mountings glistened, then thrust it slowly, firmly into the belt at his waist.

‘Amakuni-maru!’ breathed Yoichi. ‘It belongs to him now, but not for long, I swear! Not for long!’

‘By the bones of my ancestors, I will bring it back to the house of Yori,’ pledged Taro.

The two boys, of little more than thirteen summers, locked fingers on the renewal of their vow and stood watching the pageantlike scene.



THAT NIGHT the boys made a fireless camp beneath tall trees a short distance from the river. Fireless, because of the chance of being seen by the enemy, and not too far away because, though the thought was unspoken, neither of them wanted to leave the place they had once called home.

It would have been a foodless night too, had it not been for the thoughtfulness of those who had planned this escape. Hanging in a tree near the White Waterfall the boys found two large

cloth-wrapped bundles of food — enough to last them several days if carefully rationed. There was rice, and strips of raw, dried fish; chunks of bean curd and some pickled apricots so sour they puckered one's mouth. There were even delicacies like the pasty rice cakes called mochi, that stayed long in the stomach, and finally there was tangy dried seaweed to give zest to the meal.

So they dined well that night, sitting in the nests of leaves they had piled for beds. Across the river twinkled the lights of Hara's fires, and the sound of voices drifted across the water. But the boys were quiet, because their thoughts were sombre. Finally Taro spoke.

'You could go back to your real family, Yoichi. You would be safe there.'

Yoichi's face flushed in the darkness and his voice was angry. 'Have you forgotten so soon the vows we made this afternoon?' he demanded.

'No, I have not forgotten. But you have a mother and father, and brothers and sisters. You are not obliged to hold to your vow. You are not of the house of Yori —'

'My adopted father was swordmaker to the Daimio. He was as an honoured member of the family. What he was, am not I also?' asked Yoichi hotly. Then before Taro could answer, his anger changed to half-humorous wistfulness. 'Besides, in my home there are too many. When I was born already there were four daughters and ten sons. The eleventh was not welcome and my parents named me Yoichi, meaning "surplus"!'

'Fourteen brothers and sisters!' exclaimed Taro. 'You must never have been lonely.'

Yoichi laughed. 'Not fourteen, but seventeen! Three more were born after me! It is true I was never lonely. Sometimes, indeed, I wished to be more alone; there seemed to be so many things to think about and seldom enough quiet to think in.'

'While I always wanted someone to play with,' said Taro. 'The Samurai were my companions and instructors in all things. But learning to joust and becoming expert with the bow and arrow are not the same as playing at battle.'

So the boys talked as the stars came out in the moonless sky, and across the river the camp-

fires died down. Neither boy knew when the other fell asleep.

Yoichi woke up suffocating, pinned to the ground. He struck out, tearing at the hand across his mouth, and was stilled by Taro's urgent whisper.

'Make no sound! There are men in the woods, searching for us!'

Over the furious pounding of his own heart Yoichi heard a thwack! thwack! of someone wielding a stick in the underbrush. And he heard men shouting. Occasionally he saw a flicker of light.

'It does seem the search could have waited until daylight,' a tired voice, unexpectedly near, complained.

'And take the chance of losing them?' asked another. 'Perhaps you were not within hearing when the Daimio received the news that two young members of the house of Yori had escaped, eh, Ito?'

'No, I was not. I was sleeping soundly, as is natural this time of night. Who brought the news?'

Taro and Yoichi held their breaths and strained to hear the answer.

'It was a minor servant of Yori who also escaped the fate of the castle, and who sought to save his cowardly skin by telling what he knew, and so win Hara's favour.' The speaker's voice rose to a shout. 'Yasu! Goro! Do you find nothing yet?'

'Nothing!' came a distant answer.

The man called Ito grunted. 'Nor will we, I think, with such banging and shouting!'

'Are you telling me how to conduct this search?' the other asked indignantly. But he became noticeably quieter.

The boys huddled together into the pile of leaves in the hollow between the two large beech trees, listening to the men talk as they beat their way through the bushes.

'If they should find us —' Taro began, his mouth close to Yoichi's ear, but he stopped and could only shudder.

The man called Ito asked the question that was forming on Yoichi's lips. 'Why are two young ones so important?'



‘Why?’ snorted the other. ‘I think you *were* asleep! It is the heir to the title of Yori we are seeking! Should he reach important friends, there is no telling the harm he might do our master. The other is only an apprentice swordmaker, but some say he will be the greatest that ever lived — even greater than his teacher, Soga. Wait! Did you hear something?’

Burrowing deeper into the leaves, Yoichi had muffled a sneeze.

‘Only snapping twigs underfoot,’ was Ito’s answer. He yawned. ‘I do not think we will find them round here. I will look over this way a bit, then I say let us go back to bed!’

The light and voice came closer. The boys shut their eyes tightly as if that would make them invisible.

Taro's foot began to itch intolerably.

An ant crawled inside Yoichi's collar.

'There is nothing over this way!' Ito called, his sleepy voice seeming to come from directly over their heads.

'It is pretty certain they are not in this area,' the other man replied. 'Downstream is the most likely place for them to go. We waste our time here.'

The light the boys saw through squeezed eyelids seemed to circle the trees before it began to fade. Footsteps and voices grew fainter.

This time it was Yoichi who held Taro quiet. 'Do not get up just yet,' he whispered. 'They might be only pretending to go. Wait a while.'

'They have gone,' said Taro, the impatient one. 'You can barely hear them, although they make noise enough. Let us run to the cave; we will be safe there.'

'I am not so sure,' replied Yoichi, the careful. 'I believe we are safer here, where they have

already searched. Let us stay a little longer.'

Grudgingly, Taro gave in. 'Very well, but only a little while. We must head north. The sooner we reach Edo and Shogun Iyeyasu, the better it will be.'

Slowly the stars moved across the sky and once more the only sounds were the night noises of the woods and the rushing of the river. An animal's eyes gleamed for a moment as it stopped to sniff curiously, then at a sudden movement from the boys disappeared as if they had never been.

Yoichi's eyes were closing heavily when a grayness began lightening the east. Taro nudged him.

'The camp will be waking soon and will probably be moving. Let us get started ahead of them.'

Yoichi yawned. 'But why? If we go ahead of them it is more likely they will find us. We should follow them.'

'It is plain that you have never travelled with an army,' argued Taro. 'Once my father took me to Edo to a conclave of Samurai, and so slowly did we move, the moon grew and waned before we reached there.'

'But it is safer,' insisted Yoichi, 'to stay behind them.'

'Were we not told to go at once to the Shogun?' Taro demanded. He pulled Yoichi to his feet. 'Come. Do not be so lazy. There is time for sleeping when we are old and rich.'

'Very well,' grumbled his friend, 'but it is not laziness. I still think we will be safer.'

Quickly they swallowed a few mouthfuls of food, slung their bundles over their shoulders and set out along the bank, taking care to remain hidden in the trees.

'Do you know the way to Edo?' Yoichi asked, breaking a long silence.

'Not exactly,' confessed Taro, 'but it is to the north-east and with the sun to guide us we should not lose our way. Besides, the river is flowing east.'

For two long days the sun not only led them, it burned them, so that they were grateful for the river to cool their tired, aching bodies. At night they were too exhausted to do more than curl up on beds of moss and fern. Before the end of the second day their food was gone;

tramping through the woods makes big appetites. From then on it would be nuts and berries, and if they were lucky, a fish from the river.

Yoichi was the more footsore of the two, for Taro had spent his childhood in physical training as a future military leader like his father. Yoichi's training in swordmaking had given him the arms and shoulders of a man, but not the legs of a soldier. He plodded along, uncomplaining.

It was on the third day that they found they were heading in the wrong direction. The sun was setting when Taro stopped abruptly. He gazed at the river and the sky and spoke thoughtfully.

'The river seems to have changed its course; we are heading west, which is away from Edo. We must go back to the turn of the river.'

Yoichi was perplexed. 'But there was no turning,' he said, 'or we would have noticed.'

'It must have turned gradually, from east to north and finally westward. We must go back, watching closely, to discover where it starts to turn.' Taro was impatient. 'We have lost time. My father would not be pleased.'

They camped where they were that night. It was a foodless camp, and comfortless, for the ground was rocky, yielding neither berry bushes for food nor fallen leaves for beds. When the first rays of sun showed in the east they began, wearily, to retrace their steps.

'This must be the place,' sighed Yoichi, after a walk of several miles. He sank down on the bank. 'See how straight the river goes now, north and south.'

'But ahead is another bend,' answered Taro, peering upstream. 'We are still too far west.'

Three times they came to turns they had followed blindly before and when the sun began to set redly behind the trees they sank down upon the bank and gratefully bathed their tired feet.

'We shall be back where we started,' said Taro dejectedly, 'if we go any farther. I never knew a river could be so twisted.' He paddled the cool water thoughtfully, then said briskly, 'But now I know, and it is plain we can no longer follow the river. Tomorrow we must go across country.'

Another day found them climbing steep hills, stumbling down rocky canyons, threading their way through dark woods. They ate wild grapes and akebi, a sweet fruit looking something like a cucumber, and chestnuts which they cracked between two stones. They spent considerable time catching grasshoppers. Roasted in the fire, the little insects were a great delicacy, but hardly filling to empty stomachs.

By the time the sun was high the following day, the land had smoothed and the sign of a track appeared.

'We must be careful,' said Taro, 'for perhaps word has gone out and people will be looking for us.'

There was no answer from Yoichi, but since Taro himself was too tired to talk unnecessarily, he paid no attention. Then suddenly he missed the footsteps that had been following him for so many days. He turned around.

Yoichi was not there.



‘Yoichi! Where are you?’

Only silence answered him, for even the birds stopped their chatter when Taro shouted. ‘Yoichi! Why do you not answer?’

He tried not to let fear gather in the pit of his stomach. Nothing serious could have happened; he would find Yoichi sitting, resting, maybe with a stone bruise on his foot. Taro started back along the path.

Here was the stream they had forded. They? Had Yoichi been close behind him at the stream? They had walked silently, Taro in the lead for a long time. How far behind had Yoichi been?

Taro splashed into the muddy water, and his

heart almost stopped beating. That sudden swirl of the current! That white boiling-up in the brown water! Kappa⁴ lived in muddy streams! Could it be that hideous monster beneath the turbid water? Was Kappa, the boy-shaped creature with the deformed back that made him look like a huge turtle, waiting below to seize him and pull him under as he had done so many . . . ? Yoichi! No! It could not have happened! Panic sent Taro scrambling for the opposite bank. What had his nurse said? That Kappa has a deep hollow in the top of his head so that he could carry water with him and pursue his victims a short distance on land!

Taro ran.

The track led through a grove of trees. He plunged into their shelter — and on the path ahead of him was Yoichi.

He was stretched out full length, his head cradled on his arms and great sobs were shaking his body.

‘Yoichi! What is the matter? Are you hurt?’ Taro’s knees were rubbery with relief as he knelt beside his friend.

Yoichi lifted his head. His round face was tear-streaked although he was dry-eyed now, and sobs still jerked him like giant hiccups.

'No, I am not hurt. But Taro, I cannot go on.' His voice was flat.

'We will rest here,' said Taro promptly, relief making him feel almost cheerful. 'You will be rested by tomorrow.'

'It is not that I am so tired,' answered Yoichi. 'I am not worthy of the trust put in me. I want to die.'

'What do you mean? What are you talking about?'

'It is the secrets of Soga-san. I have forgotten some of them. As we walked along I kept going over them so they would remain in my head, but it was too late. I have forgotten and I have failed him.' Tears again rolled down his cheeks.

There was little Taro could say to comfort his friend, for he knew a little of what he felt, remembering the scorn, and reprimands he had received from the Samurai when a lesson was forgotten or imperfectly learned. So he sat quietly beside Yoichi.

Then, partly to divert him and partly because the horror of the monster still haunted him, he said, 'A short distance ahead there is a muddy stream and Kappa is there.'

The flat statement had the desired effect, for Yoichi raised a startled face.

'Yes,' Taro went on, 'I saw the water swirl. I thought he had caught you. I ran fast and he did not follow me, but now we must cross the stream again.'

Yoichi stared at Taro. 'You crossed the stream, knowing Kappa was there, just to find me?' he exclaimed.

'No, no,' Taro protested, 'it was not like that. It was only because I was too fearful to think. I was sure he had caught you. And I was cowardly too, for I ran away '

'Who is there who would not run from Kappa? It is a thing to remember. And I sit bewailing my troubles!' He rose, brushing himself. 'Is there some way to avoid crossing the stream?' he asked. Taro shook his head. 'Then perhaps the two of us can outwit Kappa. If we stay together and beat the water with sticks . . .

And that was the way they crossed the sluggishly flowing stream; holding tightly to each other, flailing the muddy water into brown foam. They reached the other bank without seeing the dreaded Kappa.

The trail widened to a well-trodden path, and the two boys walked side by side, silently. Only once did Taro speak.

'It is because you are tired and have had no food that you have forgotten. You will remember once you are rested.'

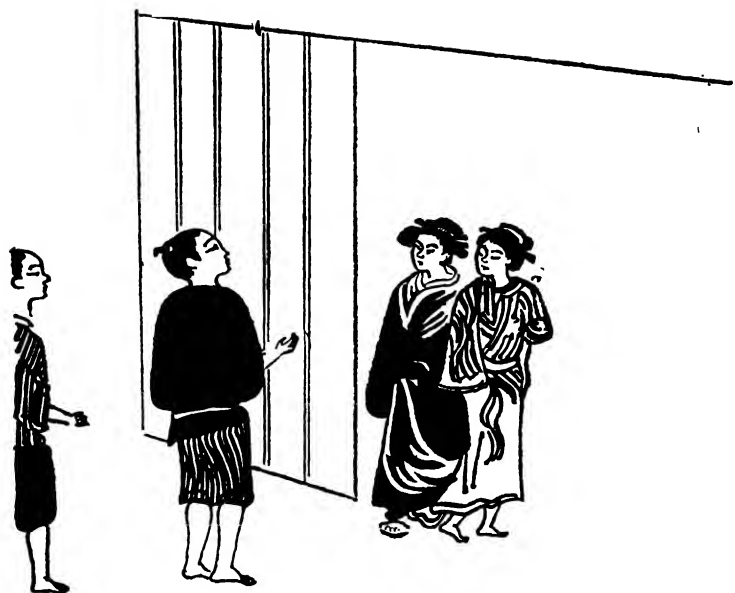
'I do not know,' Yoichi answered sombrely, 'I keep thinking and thinking . . .'

'Do not think,' said Taro.

Peasants working in fields straightened bent backs and gazed with dull eyes at the strangers.

'Perhaps if we stop they would feed us and give us a place to sleep,' suggested Yoichi.

'Let us go a little farther, because we have lost time today. Although I think we must find shelter before long; there is lightning in those clouds over the mountains.' And as Taro spoke there was a jagged flash across the sky, and thunder rolled as though smothered in the thick clouds



that suddenly darkened the sun. The wind began to blow. 'Hurry!' shouted Taro, starting to run. 'It will be a cloudburst for certain! I see a house just ahead!'

A girl was just closing the sliding windows as the boys raced toward the small thatched house. She paused to watch them, then spoke to someone inside the room. Another girl peered through the half-shut window.

Taro felt the first drop of rain as he slid to a stop and bowed to the girls, who looked slightly

alarmed. He spoke in his politest voice — which was also a bit haughty.

‘We would take shelter in your house from the approaching storm,’ he began, when Yoichi nudged him sharply.

‘You are a peasant, not a nobleman’s son,’ hissed the apprentice. ‘Do not be so demanding!’

Taro flushed guiltily and bowed again, this time much lower. Large raindrops were falling now, and the wind slanted them sharply.

‘We respectfully beg —’

‘Do not stand there as though the rain had soaked your wits.’ Someone spoke briskly from behind the door that was suddenly shoved back. A hand beckoned to them.

Heads bent against the driving rain, the boys entered the tiny vestibule. A middle-aged woman stood in the passageway that was raised one step above the packed earth. She smiled and nodded.

‘Come in, young men. This will be no storm to be out in.’

Taro and Yoichi slipped the sandals from their feet and placed them neatly beside others under the step. They wiped the raindrops from clothes

and hair as best they could, and followed the woman down the hall, the worn straw-matting feeling restful beneath their feet.

The girls had closed the window and stood side by side facing the door. When the boys entered and bowed respectfully, they broke into giggles and covered their mouths with their hands.

The woman spoke to Taro and Yoichi. 'These are my daughters, Taeko and Matsu. Your names — what would they be?'

'I am Taro, okusan,' the boy said, then instantly wished he had not. Suppose the word was out that boys named Taro and Yoichi were being hunted! 'And this is — Ito.' The name of the soldier in the forest came to him.

'What — ?' began Yoichi. Taro took a quick step backwards and bumped into him hard. The girls giggled again.

'Taro and Ito, eh?' repeated the woman, apparently noticing nothing. 'Good. I am Yukiko. My husband, Kato, will be in from the fields and we will have supper soon. You are hungry, no?'

Her bare feet made a swishing sound as she glided from the room. Taro stared at the two

sisters, feeling awkward and tongue-tied. Then he stared even more at Yoichi, who stepped forward and spoke easily to them.

'It is a good thing you were looking out of the window, or we might not have had the courage to stop.' He looked at the younger girl. 'I have a sister who is also named Taeko,' he told her.

She giggled. But the older one said, 'Please sit down,' and motioned to some cushions on the floor.

Gratefully the boys sank to their knees. The girls, too, seated themselves, folding their feet under them. For a while they all seemed to be listening to the storm battering angrily at the house.

'Where is your country?' asked the elder, who was Matsu. The boys knew that by 'country' she meant 'home'. They both answered at once.

'Aichi,' said Yoichi, truthfully.

'Gifu,' said Taro, naming a province next to Aichi.

The girls looked bewildered and inclined to giggle. Yoichi looked incredulous. For a moment Taro was flustered, then abruptly regained

his composure. 'My friend Yo — Ito means his former home was Aichi,' he said, 'but lately Gifu has been our home.'

'Where do you go?' The next inevitable question was asked.

But no answer was needed, for the mother called from the kitchen, barely making herself heard over the almost continual thunder. 'Your father is coming, girls. Prepare the water for his bath and have clean garments ready.'

When the girls had vanished Yoichi turned to Taro fiercely.

'Have you become insane? Since when is my name Ito? And how is it we are from Gifu?'

'Sh-h!' cautioned Taro. 'Do you not see it is necessary? We should have planned it all out, for they may be searching for two boys named Taro and Yoichi from Aichi. I said my proper name before I thought.'

Yoichi's face grew thoughtful. 'Yes, you are wise. Henceforth I will be Ito, from Gifu, going to — where *are* we going?'

'To Chiba, I think. We are going there to become fishermen.'

Kato-san, the master of the house, was a brawny, weather-stained man who had little to say as he deftly wielded his chopsticks during the simple evening meal in the kitchen. He listened silently while Taro talked glibly of the necessity of setting out from home because there were too many mouths to feed and the land was too unproductive. His friend Ito? Oh, he was an orphan, with no home, who had been reduced to begging and was ready for anything to better himself.

Yoichi, the skilful apprentice, with two families and seventeen brothers and sisters, was apparently so overcome that he hid his face in his arms.

'We are most grateful,' Taro went on, 'that you have taken us in from the storm and fed us.'

Kato said nothing, but Yukiko the mother, smiled kindly.

'We will be happy to give you rest tonight in our humble home,' she said. 'It is not often we have visitors. It is a pleasant change.'

Taeko, the younger daughter, who had been quietly serving endless bowls of rice to her fa-

ther, suddenly burst out, 'But sometimes very important people pass by. It was so exciting only yesterday when —'

'Daughter, the rice bowl is empty. Bring me more, hot from the fire. When your mouth speaks, your mind is forgetful.' Kato spoke sharply to the girl, who flushed and became silent while she filled the bowl from the large pan keeping warm on the brazier.

Taro bowed slightly to Yukiko as though the interruption had not happened. 'Thank you, okusan. It is many nights since Yo — Ito and I have slept beneath a roof.' Then he turned to Kato. 'Perhaps there is some work we might do tomorrow to repay your kindness.'

Yukiko started to protest, but Kato nodded. 'The daikon must be spread to dry on the racks. Two of you could do it in a short time.'

'We will see that it is done,' said Taro, hoping that Yoichi knew something about drying daikon. All he knew about the big white radishes was that they tasted good when grated and used in soup.

Suddenly Yoichi yawned. The mother laughed and sprang to her feet. 'Sleep comes early to Ito!

Come! I will prepare beds for you in the room next to the kitchen.'

The boys slept almost as soon as they crawled into the quilted beds Yukiko spread on the store-room floor. So quickly and soundly did they sleep there was no chance for them to hear the conversation in the kitchen.

Kato finished the last of the rice, then rose abruptly from the low table. He spoke to his daughters. 'Matsu, bring my straw coat. It still rains, though the storm has quieted. Taeko, I will need a torch to show when I near the camp. Bring me one quickly.'

'Father, where do you go at this hour? And what do you mean, "when you near the camp"?''

Kato glowered at Taeko. 'Again you speak when you should act. But you asked a question and I will answer. At this hour I go to the camp of the Daimio of Hara to claim the reward offered. How very nearly you revealed that he and his Samurai had passed this way only yesterday!'

'But Father —' the girl was too incredulous to be fearful of his anger, 'you speak of a reward. You do not think —'

‘That young Taro is the lord of Yori? Indeed I do! And “Ito”! Did not the soldiers say the apprentice boy was Yoichi, and did not Taro more than once begin to call him that?’ A servile tone crept into the man’s voice. ‘I may be only a humble peasant and serf to his Lordship of Hara, but it is in my power to do him a service — and earn a considerable sum for my pains!’ His eyebrows met in a sudden frown and he glared at his wife and daughters. ‘Do not stand before me staring stupidly! My cape and torch, at once! I have a journey to make!’



‘WAKE UP! Oh, please, wake up!’

Taro’s eyes flew open when he became aware of being shaken violently while the urgent voice pleaded.

‘What is it? An earthquake?’ He sat bolt upright. Yoichi, too, was sitting up, staring at the two girls who had awakened them so suddenly.

‘Hurry! Hurry!’ Matsu was begging. ‘He left last night soon after you were in bed, and he might be back soon, for they cannot have gone very far since yesterday. You must get away!’

‘Get away? What is it you are talking about?’

Matsu was almost crying. ‘It is our father. He

knows who you are, that you belong to the house of Yori. He has gone to Hara's camp to tell them and to — to claim the reward!' Now tears streamed down her face. Taeko, too, buried her face in her hands.

'Hara!' gasped Taro. 'But they are far behind us!'

'No,' protested Matsu, 'only yesterday the Daimio and his army passed this way. They left word they were looking for two boys. And now our father has gone after them. All night we could not sleep, my mother and sister and I, and now we are defying our father. But we are so ashamed!'

Yoichi spoke for the first time. 'It is because we lost several days following the river that they are ahead of us. What shall we do?'

Taro forced himself to think calmly. 'We cannot go ahead this way,' he mused aloud, 'and I will not go back. We must hide. But where? Where can we hide that Kato-san will not find us?'

Matsu sprang to her feet. 'We will find somewhere! Hurry and dress. Mother is preparing

boxes of food for you to take.' She took the weeping Taeko by the hand, and they ran from the room.

Feverishly the boys pulled on their outer garments and hurried into the kitchen. The girls were by the open window, peering anxiously into the gray, overcast dawn. Their mother worked at the table. She greeted them sombrely, bowing when she spoke to Taro. 'It is not good what has happened,' she said quietly; then she gave her complete attention to the work her busy hands were doing. It was plain she did not approve of her husband's actions, but, loyally, she would make only the mildest of protests.

Taeko called from the window, 'There is no one coming except old Tanaka-san and his lame dog!' The seriousness of a few minutes ago was fast disappearing, and in its place was a conspiratorial air and the suppressed excitement of adventure.

'Still we must not delay, for they will travel fast on horseback.' Matsu ran to the table where Yukiko still worked. 'Do you have the boxes packed, Mother? Put in plenty of rice, for they

may have to stay hidden for a long while!' She turned to her sister. 'Taeko, do you still see no one? Good!' Moving like a whirlwind, she gathered up the boxes of food, wrapped them in large, square cloths, thrust one into the hands of each dazed boy, then shoved them both toward the door. 'Hurry, hurry, hurry!' she urged. 'There is no time to lose.'

Taro and Yoichi, feeling out-generated, allowed themselves to be herded outside. In the doorway Taro turned back to Yukiko, who had taken Taeko's place at the window. There were words he wanted to say, but they would not come. The sight of her pale, sad face brought a lump to his throat; it was so like the last glimpse he had had of his mother.

His arm was being pulled. Yoichi said with a chuckle, 'Perhaps you, being sisterless, do not know how insistent girls can be! But it may be they are right this time. We may be in danger.'

'I am coming,' answered Taro. He looked again at Yukiko. 'Goodby, okusan. I shall not forget.' He bowed to the woman and went out into the damp morning.

The girls waited near a shed where a few bedraggled chickens scratched hopefully in the dirt. Taeko was fairly dancing with impatience. 'You are so slow! Anyone would think you wanted to be caught!'

Each girl carried over her arm a bulky cape made of straw. 'We must work in the fields after we have hidden you,' explained Matsu, 'and the sky threatens rain again, so we must have our capes nearby.'

'Where is it you would have us hide?' asked Taro. The four of them began walking rapidly.

'On the other side of the rice field is country that is rough and broken and full of many hiding places. It will be easy to keep out of sight of the searches.'

'Wait a minute,' said Yoichi abruptly. He had stopped and was looking at several large baskets full of long white vegetables. 'The daikon,' he said, 'that we promised to put to dry to pay Kato-san for his hospitality.'

'Is it hospitable to betray your guests to their enemy?' Taro demanded. 'It is not the thing an honourable man would do!' His eyes met

Yoichi's gaze. 'You are thinking that an honourable man also keeps a promise, is that it, Yoichi?' A puzzled frown creased his forehead, and there was coldness in his voice when he spoke. 'Kato-san is an enemy to the house of Yori. Must I keep a promise to my enemy?'

'There is Yukiko-san,' said Yoichi. 'She is not an enemy.'

Taro's eyes brightened. 'No,' he agreed, 'she is our friend. As are the sisters. We can keep our promise to them. We will rack the daikon before we leave.'

The girls had been listening with mouths agape. Now, at Taro's last words, they both uttered dismayed protests. Matsu stamped her foot in exasperation. 'No! No! It will take too long! They will be coming and you will surely be caught! How can you do this when our father has treated you so disgracefully?'

The boys were too busy to answer. Yoichi had found a bamboo rack, which he propped against a row of neatly clipped bushes that edged the path. 'Bring the daikon over here,' he directed Taro. 'We must lay them on the mesh squares

so the air will reach both sides and none are touching.'

'I remember now,' said Taro, trying to lift the heavy basket and finally dragging it nearer the rack. 'I have seen daikon drying, sometimes hanging over fences or from the eaves.'

'Did you never see it arranged on a rack like this?', asked Yoichi, beginning to take the vegetables from the basket. 'Sometimes they are laid in careful patterns.'

Matsu threw down her rain cape in disgust. 'Such foolish stubbornness!' she fumed. 'We should leave you to be captured! Taeko, help me with this basket!'

So the four of them worked, paying no attention to the blue-black clouds gathering over the mountains, until, as though a curtain had been drawn, the newly risen sun vanished, leaving the sky sullen.

'The storm will break soon,' prophesied Taeko at last, casting a glance upward while dumping an armload of daikon on the rack for Yoichi to arrange. 'You should be in your hiding place before it begins. The rain will make the —'

‘They are coming! I hear the horses’ hoofs!’
The excited cry came from the house where Yukiko stood in the doorway, jabbing a finger toward the road. ‘They are coming rapidly!’

‘Run, run, run!’ screamed Matsu, snatching up her raincape. Taeko grabbed hers, while Taro and Yoichi seized the bundles that held their food, and they all sprinted down the path leading to the rice field.

The boys stumbled over the unfamiliar ground. Thunder rolled in the darkening clouds, but another rumbling sound was more ominous to their ears. It was the sound of many running horses. The rice fields seemed to stretch out endlessly.

‘How much farther?’ gasped Yoichi. ‘The horesemen are riding swiftly!’

‘Do not talk! We must reach those trees!’ Matsu’s breath came pantingly, and then she screamed and fell to the ground.

Lightning tore a jagged hole in the clouds. Thunder seized the clouds and shook them, ripping them apart and spilling rain in one gigantic cloudburst.

Taeko sank to the ground beside her sister. 'Matsu! Get up! Get up!' She shook her roughly. 'Taro, help me! Matsu has been struck by lightning!'

'Perhaps not!' shouted the boy, shrinking down beside the others as another burst of lightning streaked across the sky. 'She fell, I think, because it frightened her.'

Yoichi tried to peer through the thick curtain of rain. 'They will be coming. We must carry her.'

But at that moment Matsu stirred and opened her eyes. 'No, I am all right,' she said weakly. 'It is as Taro said, the sudden storm frightened me.' She struggled to her feet, shaking her head in an effort to clear it. 'We cannot get across the field, but I have a plan.' She moved quickly, crouching against the rain. 'Taeko, give me your cape! Taro, get down, and put it over you! Yoichi, get under mine! Now, stay down and be still! Taeko, come, we will head them off—'

'Matsu, wait—!' Taro half rose from his crouching position. 'Your father will—'

'Get down!' Matsu shoved him back. 'The

rain is lessening, the horsemen will not be delayed long! Come, Taeko!' She grabbed her sister by the arm and they ran, heads bent against the storm.

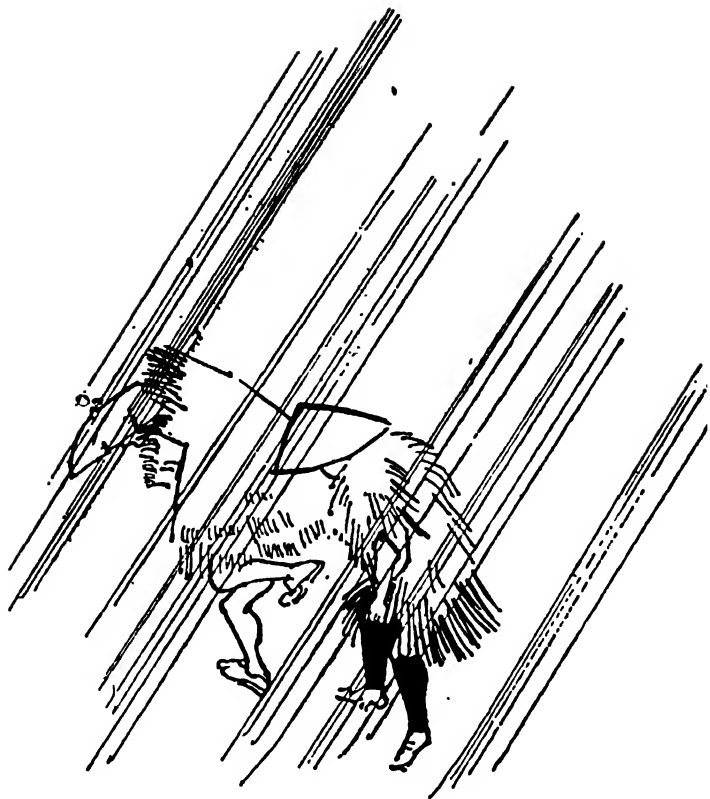
'Taro, can you hear me?' Yoichi's voice was muffled beneath the protective cape even though he spoke loudly over the storm's noises. 'This is a good disguise, is it not? We must look like piles of wet straw!' The last of his words were lost in an explosive burst of lightning and crash of thunder. When the echoes died away, the boys could hear shouts and voices blurred in the splattering rain. Some words escaped.

'Daughter! Where — ?'

A giant clap of thunder.

'— boys?' The word hung like a huge question mark, and then Kato bellowed louder, 'Where are they?'

Matsu's answer never came, for the whole world turned white, blinding the fugitives under the straw capes, and at the same time thunder crashed until the ground shook. There seemed to be an absolute silence for an instant, and then a chorus of voices rose in a shout.



'Your house, Kato-san! The lightning has struck! It starts to burn!'

The hiding boys simultaneously lifted the tentlike capes and peered out. They saw Kato running toward his house, where black smoke rolled from cracks in the flimsy wooden building and through the thatched roof. They saw armoured Samurai wheel their horses in the mud.

And they saw Matsu stop running. She turned back to face them and, motioned frantically. 'Go! Go!' she seemed to be saying.

'We are forgotten,' exalted Taro. 'Now is our chance! Come on, Yoichi, the fire will not burn long in this rain. Run as you have never run before!'



THE RICE FIELDS were full of stubble and bogs to snare their feet and often sent them sprawling full length in the mud.

‘It is just a little farther,’ panted Taro, pulling Yoichi from a big mud hole. ‘They have not started after us yet, but when the fire is out —’ He wasted no more breath on words, but doubled his effort, forcing Yoichi to do the same by holding tightly to his arm.

They reached the first trees. Still there was no pursuit. Pausing long enough to peer backward into the slackening rain, Yoichi took great gulps of air and said, 'The rain must have put the fire out. There is no more smoke.'

'Then they will be after us. We cannot stay here.' Taro, who had dropped to his knees the moment they stopped, pushed himself upright with a sigh.

'But which way?' demanded Yoichi. 'Which way do we go?'

'Still to the northeast.'

'But without the sun today, how can we tell we are heading in the right direction?' Yoichi's voice came jerkily as he dog-trotted behind Taro.

'The storm came from that way and is now behind us. But I think it is clearing and the sun will soon be out. Be careful!' he cautioned, 'we are coming to a clearing . . . make sure no one is there!'

They dropped to their knees and crawled forward to look out between the trees. 'I see no one.' Caution made Yoichi whisper. Then he gasped. • 'But look, there is Mount Fujii' He

gazed in awe at the snow-capped mountain, lonely and aloof, though ringed by attendant clouds.

Both boys 'touched their foreheads to the ground in homage to the Sacred Mountain.

'It is just as the artists paint it,' said Taro, sitting back on his heels. 'And do you know, I heard Kakugyo — when he was a guest at my father's castle — say that Mount Fuji was "the beginning of heaven and earth." Kakugyo is a very wise man.'

For a few minutes they sat quietly, looking at the distant mountain. Taro gave a sudden exclamation. 'Fuji-san will be our guide! As long as we keep it on our left we will be heading in the right direction!' He picked up his bundle of food. 'Come on, we must not wait any longer.' He looked around and then demanded, 'Where is your bundle?'

Startled realization dawned in Yoichi's eyes and he shook his head slowly. 'I do not know. I never noticed I did not have it. I must have dropped it when I fell — or left it beneath the cape.' He drew in a sharp breath. 'Taro! They will find it! They will know the girls hid us!

What will happen to them?’

‘I do not know, but I think that Kato-san will not let the girls come to any harm, though he is a harsh man. There is nothing we can do except go quickly, for they will be on our trail.’

They lost track of time as they hurried on, skirting the edge of the forest. ‘It does not seem to have rained here,’ Taro called over his shoulder. ‘The ground is quite dry.’

Frequently they rested briefly, straining their ears for sounds of pursuit.

Finally Taro stopped so suddenly that Yoichi, close behind, collided with him. ‘We must rest and eat, or we shall have no strength left.’ They sank wearily to the ground, and Yoichi began rubbing his aching feet.

‘It is good to rest, but I am not hungry. You eat and I will keep watch behind us.’

Taro looked keenly at his friend. There was an understanding gleam in his eyes, but he made his voice gruff when he answered. ‘Ho! Not hungry! You must be sick then, and ready to meet your ancestors. But you do not look sick. You look very healthy. Here! Eat some rice that Yukiko-

san prepared for us.' He placed the lunchbox from his bundle between them, and then, scooping up a handful of fluffy rice, began to eat.'

Yoichi's face was stubborn. 'It is not right that I eat what is yours. I lost —'

Taro shoved the box closer to Yoichi, at the same time cramming another handful of rice into his own mouth. 'Eat!' he commanded loudly, if indistinctly. 'We are losing time!'

Yoichi ate.

And then they both slept.

Taro's eyes flew open just as Yoichi jumped to his feet. For a second he could not remember why he was there, then —

'I hear something!' He, too, was standing, and the two of them strained eyes and ears for the noise that had awakened them.

'There!' Yoichi exclaimed, 'It sounds like running horses!'

Taro began bundling up the remains of their lunch. 'We must leave nothing to show we have been here.' He kicked at the packed leaves where they had slept. 'We shall have to go deeper into the forest.'

They plunged headlong into the thicker growth of trees. Fortunately there was little underbrush, and they dodged between the trees with considerable speed.

And abruptly the forest ended. Before them stretched an open place of rocks and tall grass. Beyond that was a noisy river.

But it was not the sight of the exposed ground they must cover that made them gasp; it was the sudden appearance of six horsemen sweeping around the far edge of the forest, brandishing swords, and rising in their stirrups with wild shouts when they saw the boys.

'Run!' screamed Taro. 'To the river! I see a bridge. We must reach it before they cut us off!'

Less than a mile separated the boys from the horsemen; less than one hundred yards ahead was the river and the bridge that arched it. Could they reach it in time? And once across could they somehow block the passage of the soldiers? These thoughts raced through Taro's head as he fought his way over protruding boulders and stumbled into grassy hollows. The rain that had drenched them miles back had apparently not



fallen in this area, and the dry, knee-high grass crackled as they ploughed through it.

Closer and closer the horses came. Farther and farther away seemed the river.

Taro stumbled and fell forward hard, grunting with pain as the tinderbox inside his shirt was driven cruelly against his ribs. But he knew he had found the means of escape.

'Yoichi!' he shouted. 'Grass! Bring handfuls of grass!' And as though he had gone completely crazy he started frantically trying to coax sparks from the tinderbox. Nothing happened. Perhaps the flint had been dampened by the rain. Again and again. A faint burning smell. He could not take time to look up but he could hear the horses coming nearer. Yoichi dumped an armload of grass in front of him.

'Why —?' began the apprentice.

'It has started!' Carefully, steadily Taro blew on the smouldering tinder. It smoked, glowed, and burst into a tiny flame. Still cautiously, Taro put the burning tinder on the pile of dry grass. The flame grew, reaching hungrily for more food, and beginning to crackle noisily as it strengthened.



Yoichi, comprehending, seized a bunch of the blazing grass and jumping from rock to rock, set fire to patches of grass — there and there and there! Almost instantly there was a shield of fire between the boys and their pursuers. Only a few yards away through the smoke and flame they could see terrified horses plunging and unseating their riders.

The boys ran. They would have time now. There was the bridge, spanning the torrent of white foam that crashed its way over jutting boulders. They raced toward the foot of the bridge, and almost plunged headlong into the fence that barricaded it!

'The bridge is blocked! We cannot cross!' Yoichi's voice was a kind of a croak, and Taro felt all the strength running out of him, leaving his knees weak and rubbery.

'It is the Sacred Bridge,' he whispered. 'I have heard my father speak of it. I should have recognized it because of its bright red colour.'

'Sacred Bridge? I do not understand,' said Yoichi.

'It is a bridge that only the Son of Heaven, the Emperor, may cross,' answered Taro, gazing morosely at the forbidden bridge.

'But we *must* cross it! It is our only means of escape! Surely we would be forgiven!'

'It is forbidden!' insisted the young lord of Yori. 'Though the Shogun now rules Nippon, it is still the Sacred Bridge. Were we to set foot upon it we would be struck dead instantly.'

So intent were they upon the problem, they had momentarily forgotten the soldiers until high-pitched yells pierced the air and seemed to rock the very ground.

‘They have gone round the fire!’ Taro stared wild-eyed at the galloping horses, still wary of the flames, but guided by the firm hands of their masters. His glance swung back to the river, to the bridge they dared not cross. He drew in his breath sharply, then seized Yoichi by the arm, and together they fled toward the river.

The approaching horsemen drew hard on their reins, and the triumphant shouts died in their throats when they saw the two boys disappear over the steep bank and into the rocky path of the raging river.



THE BANK was steep and the rocks sharp, bruising and stunning the boys as they sprawled and slipped toward the water. But near the foot of the bridge Taro regained his feet, shook off dizziness and hauled Yoichi upright.

‘This way,’ he panted, barely hearing his own voice over the rumble of the rapids. ‘To the bridge!’

He paid no attention to the protestations of the other, but led him toward the braces that

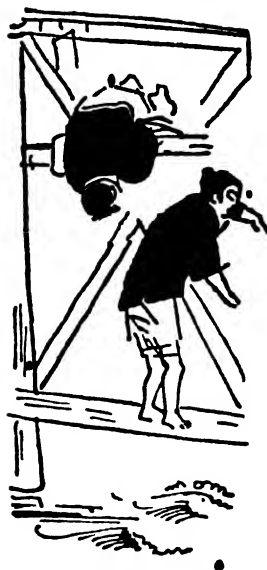
supported the bridge on the rocky shore line. He boosted Yoichi to the top of a flat rock and pulled himself up.

'If we cannot cross *over* the Sacred Bridge,' he said, 'we will cross *under* it! These braces lead to the crosspieces. We can work our way over on them.'

Yoichi's eyes were terrified. 'No! No! I cannot.'

'It is the only way! Follow me!' And Taro gave Yoichi no more time for protests, but scrambled up the slanting support and hauled himself on to the crosspiece underneath the bridge. 'Grab my hand!' he shouted back to Yoichi, and leaned down from his precarious perch, his arms outstretched. 'Over here,' he directed, sliding along toward the side of the bridge when Yoichi was beside him. 'Crawl along this ledge, then to the next crosspiece. We can go over all the way like that and cannot be seen from the bank.' He looked anxiously at the pale face of his less agile companion. 'You can do it, can you not?'

'Yes, yes, I think,' answered Yoichi. 'Go ahead. I will follow.'



Even for Taro it was a nightmare. Inch by inch they squirmed along the narrow beam, gingerly hoisting themselves over the crosspieces. Should a hand slip, should a wave of dizziness overtake them, there was only the cold, rushing river and jagged rocks below.

‘How much farther?’ asked Yoichi finally, his voice sounding thin and raspy.

‘We are about halfway,’ Taro answered, carefully swinging a leg over a beam. Then his tone brightened and he called back, ‘This board is wide enough to rest on. I will slide along to make room for you.’

They sat side by side, dangling their legs, yet not daring to relax their hold on the narrow ledge. The roar of the river reverberated against the arch of the bridge and throbbed in their ears.

'Can you see the soldiers?' yelled Yoichi, leaning as much as he dared toward Taro.

'No, but at least they are not following us. Perhaps they believe we have perished in the river.'

'Perhaps they will be right!' muttered Yoichi, casting a fearful glance at the foaming water below. But his words did not reach the ears of Taro who was already preparing to move on.

It seemed easier as they began the second half of their sliding, crawling journey. Perhaps it seemed so easy for Taro that he became careless. For when he prepared to lift himself over a cross-piece he lost his balance. Suddenly he was face down, hugging the narrow beam with both arms, while one leg dangled into space and the other was slipping, slipping from the beam. His face was pressed into the rough wood, and he dared not try to turn his head. He tried to hitch the slipping knee over the beam, and his whole body began turning. Only by gripping savagely with

his arms and pressing his body tightly against the rafter did he save himself from falling. He wanted to call out but was afraid even to breathe. His arms began to ache and perspiration made his palms slippery.

In reality it was only seconds, but to Taro it was hours before he felt a firm grip on the waistband of his trousers. Then Yoichi gave the slipping knee a thrust and Taro was straddling the beam and able to sit upright. He was shaking so violently that Yoichi, sidling closer, put a steadying arm around him.

'It is lucky it was not I who slipped,' said the apprentice, 'for surely I would have fallen. You are very strong, Taro.'

Taro laughed shakily. '*You* are very quick-witted! I could not have held on much longer! And now,' he took a deep breath, 'it feels so good just to sit here, I am not sure I want to go on!'

But Yoichi's tone was serious. 'Taro, I have been thinking. Suppose the soldiers found some other way to cross the river? Suppose they are waiting for us on the other side?'

Taro looked at his friend with startled eyes.

'I had not thought. It seemed so impossible . . . but perhaps there was another way to cross!'. He was silent for a moment. 'Well,' he shrugged philosophically, 'we cannot sit here, we cannot go back, all we can do is go ahead. If we are captured — that is how it must be! I am rested now. It is best we get it over with.'

Painfully, slowly they crept forward, concentrating on every move, not daring to seek for reassuring signs of the end of the ordeal. Then Taro shouted over his shoulder, 'We slant downward! We are nearly across!'

Now they could see the far end of the bridge resting on the bank. Only a little farther and they would be within jumping distance.

'Be careful,' cautioned Yoichi as he saw Taro prepare to drop to the ground. 'The soldiers may —'

Taro had landed in a patch of sand, the only bit of sand among the rocks. He remained as he landed, crouched and tense. But no soldiers appeared. Slowly he stood erect and looked around, then turned and motioned to Yoichi. 'We are safe,' he shouted, moving aside so that

Yoichi might drop beside him on the sand.

'There is no one here!'

Nor were their pursuers visible on the far side of the river. They saw only lazy trickles of smoke as the fire they had started on the rocky ground burned itself out. But when they climbed on to the bank Taro pointed to a haze in the distance. 'That might be dust made by running horses,' he said. 'I think the soldiers are headed back to their camp. We should be safe from them for a long time!'

Reaction set in after the narrow escape, and neither was aware of the hardness of the rocks that were their beds that night. But they knew the next morning when aching muscles protested at being moved.

And they were hungry. Taro's bundle had disappeared he knew not where, and the open country they began to cross offered no fruit or nut-bearing trees.

Doggedly they kept on, guided by Mount Fuji, and the sun that dodged in and out of thunderclouds.

That night it rained again; not hard, but equally soaking and chilly to the weary and hungry boys, huddling together in front of a sputtering, smoking fire that finally went out altogether.

It was two days later that they saw the first sign of a human being. The thatched roof of a peasant's house appeared at the bend of a small stream they were following. Involuntarily they drew back, remembering Kato and his treachery.

'Suppose they, too, have been warned to be on the lookout for us? It is better we go hungry than be caught by Hara.' Yoichi was munching on a persimmon which they had found growing wild and his eyes searched every part of the neatly swept clearing where the house stood.

'But it is a chance we must take,' Taro declared. 'We must reach the Shogun, and we need food to keep our strength.' He, too, studied the scene before them. Not a living thing stirred. At last he said, 'Only one of us must go. There is nothing strange about a wandering peasant boy asking for food. Let me see, I will use the same story as before, only I will not give my right name. What name . . .? Kato! Yes, thank you,

Kato-san, for the use of your name!' Taro was actually laughing for the first time in many days.

'The plan is good,' said Yoichi, 'but for one thing.'

'What is that?' demanded Taro indignantly.

Yoichi smiled. 'Just that,' he answered. 'You are too imperious, too demanding to be a proper peasant. It will be better if I go.'

Taro leaned against a tree, looking a trifle sheepish. 'I suppose you are right. You are a much better actor than I. If you had been the spokesman before, we might not have been suspected. I will wait around the bend of the stream. Hurry though, before I starve to death! Be sure to bring all the rice they can spare!'

The boys started off in opposite directions. 'Yoichi!' Taro called as loudly as he dared, 'if they should offer you some misoshiru be sure that I get my share!' He waved gaily and turned away, laughing again at the thought of Yoichi trying to carry soup in a cloth-wrapped bundle.

It seemed a long, long time before Yoichi reappeared, carrying a small bundle. Making sure they were well out of sight of the house, Taro

eagerly unfolded the coarse cloth while Yoichi told his story.

‘Only the okusan was there, and at first she did not want to open the door to me.’

‘Because you are such a fierce-looking character,’ taunted Taro, stuffing his mouth full of rice. Then he spied some fat, succulent mushrooms hidden beneath the rice. ‘Matsutake!’ he sighed blissfully, picking out a large piece. ‘That is even a better treat than misoshiru! But she did let you in?’ he asked, chewing hard.

‘Yes. She said I really looked hungry. Then she apologized because they were so very poor and had little to offer. Only rice and tea —’ Yoichi flushed guiltily. ‘I had no way to bring the tea. But her husband had only recently been to the red pine forests where the matsutake grow and brought back such a supply that she could spare me some.’

‘We will ask the ancestors to bless her,’ Taro said, licking his fingers and then searching for any overlooked grain of rice. ‘Did she think it strange that you should wish to carry some away with you?’

‘No. In fact, she suggested it.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Taro, shaking out the brown square of cloth the food had been wrapped in, ‘you should return this furoshiki to her.’

‘No,’ Yoichi said again, ‘that, she said, would be a present. It was newly woven and to give it as a gift would bring good fortune to her home.’

‘I shall remember,’ Taro said, ‘and when the power of Yori is regained, she will have a fine furoshiki of silk.’

Yoichi nodded his approval. ‘I shall remember, too, and will give her a fine lacquer rice-bowl,’ he promised.



TARO, plodding wearily along a well-worn path, stopped and made a motion to listen. 'Do you hear something?' he asked Yoichi in a whisper.

Yoichi nodded. 'Voices.' He, too, whispered. 'Many voices, talking and laughing. They seem to be getting closer.'

'They are coming down the path behind us!' Alarm flared inside Taro. 'I was afraid when we found this road we would meet many travellers. Quick! Over into those trees!'

From their hiding place they watched a group of people come down the dusty road. They were in holiday dress and festive mood. Men led the

way, conversing amiably; then women, holding children by the hand or carrying small babes on their backs; finally came the older children, laughing and shouting and teasing one another.

Clearly the boys heard the piping voice of a



child who had run forward to tug at her father's kimonosleeve. 'How much farther is it, otoosan?'

'It is not so very far,' he answered. 'Are you tired? Let me carry you for a while.' The man



stooped, and the child climbed upon his back. He clasped his hands behind him to give her support and hurried to catch up with the others.

The boys waited until they were long gone before stepping out on to the path.

‘Not far to *where?*’ exclaimed Taro impatiently. ‘What is it we are coming to? It is dangerous to be in a strange country!’

Twice more they dived into the bushes to let travellers go by. There was a holiday air about them all, as though all the daily cares were forgotten for a while.

'It is strange,' mused Taro. 'I know of no festival at this time of the year; still, why else would these people be gathering?'

'Perhaps in this part of the country there are festivals different from ours,' suggested Yoichi. Then he stopped abruptly, and began sniffing the air. 'Sushi!' he exclaimed. 'Someone is cooking sushi!'

Taro sniffed experimentally, and a hungry, empty look spread over his face. 'I smell it too! Someone close by is eating it. Maybe they will give us some.' His mouth fairly watered as he thought of the taste of the rice, made tangy with vinegar and so very tempting with chopped fish and vegetables.



But hardly had they started forward again than once more they were brought to a sudden halt. This time a large black dog bounded out from the woods, greeting them noisily, his tail wagging amiably.

The boys stood very still. 'Perhaps he will not bite if we do not move,' Yoichi said in a slow, even voice.

'Of course he will not bite! Tashi never bites anyone!' The voice that reassured them seemed to have a laugh in it. The boys whirled around and saw, coming from the woods, an old man whose long beard was white in contrast to his



wrinkled brown face, and who carried a large wicker basket strapped to his back. He snapped his fingers at the dog. 'Here, Tashi! You must not alarm the young masters.'

'We are not alarmed,' said Taro with considerable dignity. 'He startled us, that's all.' He watched curiously as the old man unstrapped the basket from his back and lowered it to the ground. 'That is a large burden you carry through the woods. What is in the basket?' he asked, seeing a movement through the latticed sides.

The old man chuckled. 'I carry my fortune, and the fortunes of others,' he said mysteriously. 'Perhaps your fortune, my young lord!'

Taro's eyes widened and he heard Yoichi gasp. 'How — how did you know?' he asked wonderingly.

'With eyes one observes, with ears one hears. Though your clothes are those of peasants and are tattered, your manner and your voice say you are not what you seem.' He turned keen eyes toward Yoichi. 'And your companion, he also is not what he pretends, but as yet I cannot name his place.'

Yoichi stepped forward quickly. 'It does not matter who I am, but it will go badly with us if — if certain people find us. Can we ask your help to keep the secret that we have been here?' Both boys watched the old man anxiously.

He chuckled again as he caressed Tashi's ears. 'Your secret is safe with Tashi and me. But you would be wise to avoid the crowd that will be in Kamakura for the festival.'

'Kamakura!' The word seemed to explode from Taro's lips. 'We are near to Kamakura?'

The old man nodded. 'Not more than two miles away is the Shrine at which the honourable Yoritomo worshipped many centuries ago, and where he founded the class of heroes we call the Samurai. It is his festival that is being celebrated now, with lords and their Samurai from all of Nippon attending to worship and take part in the games. That is why I suggest you would do well to avoid the city, my young lord, if you are hiding from someone.'

'Yes.' Taro nodded absently, his thought racing backwards until he seemed to hear his father's voice: 'We are an ancient family, my son. Our

ancestor was Yoritomo, the great and noble lord, and from him we take our name. Someday I will take you to his grave in his city of Kamakura.'

And now he was here. But not as a proud member of the house of Yori. He was a fugitive, hunted by his enemies, instead of leading his own band of brave and loyal knights.

Yoichi was speaking. '... nothing but berries and one fish for two days. It was only a moment before you came that we smelled — or thought we smelled — sushi.' He sighed deeply. 'But I suppose —'

'Sushi!' exclaimed the old man with something like a screech. And he dived towards the big wicker basket, and from the top of it took a covered bowl. Spryly he came back to the staring boys. 'Sushi you were smelling for sure, young masters, for that is what I was eating when you came along. And see,' he uncovered the black lacquer dish, and the boys gasped at the pungent smell that floated out. 'See, there is plenty left.' He thrust the dish toward them. 'Eat,' he said.

They forgot their manners and dipped with

greedy, clawing fingers into the fragrant sushi. The old man watched 'them tolerantly, but Tashi's looks were disapproving — probably because not even a grain fell his way.

Taro licked his fingers and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Only then did the lessons his mother had taught him come back. 'Thank you, Old One,' he said bowing. 'You have done a service that will not be forgotten. It would be an honour to know your name.'

'I am Isobe, my young lord, the Bird Fortune-teller of Kamakura, and pleased to be of service.' He bowed deeply.

'Bird Fortune-teller!' Taro's glance darted from the man to the wicker basket. 'Do you really — is there really a bird in the cage? Can he really tell fortunes? I have heard of such things! Can he tell mine?' The young lord of Yori was an eager boy again. He and Yoichi peered intently into the cage.

'Come,' said Isobe, jumping up from the stump where he had been resting. 'Let me show you Yamagara. He is no doubt impatient of this delay, for we were on our way from our cottage

in the woods to entertain at the festival.' He thrust his hand through a small door in the cage. 'Ohayo, Yamagara! Have you a word of greeting for your old master?'

The robin, sitting on Isobe's finger, cheeped plaintively and then, with a bold and inquisitive eye, stared at Taro and Yoichi.

Isobe chuckled. 'He is wondering why he is not asked to perform since there are strangers about.'

'Ask him to —' Taro's words were interrupted by shouts of raucous laughter on the path behind them, and the tramp of heavy feet. 'Someone is coming!' he gasped. 'Suppose it should be the Samurai of Hara! We must hide!'

'Young master! Help lift the cage! Hurry, follow me!'

Isobe thrust the bird in the basket, and knelt on the path while the boys hoisted it to his back. Then, stepping spryly, he melted into the woods, his dog Tashi close beside him. The boys followed quickly, stepping where he stepped, for no twig snapped beneath his feet.

Out on the path men approached, carefree as

men are on a holiday, and passed by, unaware of the three hidden only a few feet away.

‘They are only men of the next village,’ Isobe said, when the last echo of laughter had gone, ‘but I heard you say the name of Hara. Is it the house of Hara that you would avoid?’

‘Yes,’ answered Taro, ‘they are seeking us, for I am heir to the house of Yori and they fear my gaining favour with the Shogun Iyeyasu. Yoichi is the apprentice swordmaker who has a greater gift than his master, Soga, who is dead with my family. Hara would have his talent.’

‘Ah so!’ mused the old man, nodding gravely. ‘Then you are wise indeed to remain hidden in this neighbourhood. It has reached my ears that Hara and his Samurai join in the festival at Kamakura.’



TARO was bored. It was the second day he had been alone, and he wished he had not agreed to the plan suggested by Isobe.

'It will be best if you stay in my humble cottage,' the old Bird Fortune-teller had suggested, 'to rest and have nourishment before travelling on.' Later he had said, shaking his head over the condition of the boys' clothing, 'It will never do that you seek favour of the Shogun dressed in

such rags. I have a plan by which you could earn money for what you need.' He spoke to Yoichi. 'Do Hara's men know your face?'

The boy shook his head. 'I think not, for never did they get so close to us. But close enough,' he added, shivering.

'Then I think it will be safe for you to enter the employ of a swordmaker friend of mine in Kamakura. The pay will not be much but it will enable you to buy the clothing you both need. You will live with him and he will feed you well.'

The plan had seemed good, and the next morning — Yoichi refusing the day or two of rest — Taro watched the old man and boy set out for the city. He held a whining Tashi by the scruff of the neck until they were out of sight, and their voices swallowed up by the trees.

That first day had passed pleasantly. At first Taro sat down cross-legged in a sunny spot to enjoy the luxury of simply not moving. Tashi sat in front of him, looking expectant. Not telling what exciting things might happen with this boy here!

But the boy only laughed and gave the dog a gentle shove and began to rub his stomach when he lay upside down. 'I have walked too far of late to play,' he said. 'Let me rest a while.'

So they lay in the sun and rested. It involved a bit of moving to follow the sun through the open spots in the foliage, until the sun's rays fell right in the middle of the shallow stream at the back of the house.

'It is time to go in anyway. I think the birds must be hungry.'

Yamagara, the robin Isobe carried in his cage, was not the only bird he had. Four more robins were being trained to become fortune-telling birds. When Taro stepped inside the cottage they all chirped at him and fluttered in their cages.

'I wonder if they will perform for me? I wonder if I can remember what Isobe showed us last night?' He moved a bamboo stand into the centre of the room. On one end it held a bird cage and on the other end was a miniature shrine complete with pagodaed roof and swinging lanterns. It was a replica of the stand Isobe carried in his

basket and set up in the festival grounds.

Taro placed one of the robins on the stand. 'Will you tell my fortune, now?' he asked. 'We will pretend we are at a festival.' He took a coin from a nearby bowl and held it toward the robin. The bird hesitated a minute, then carefully took the coin from Taro's fingers. In a few short, quick hops he was in front of the shrine, and had dropped the coin into the offering box. He cocked his head, as though pondering his next move, then pecked sharply at a tiny bell hanging below the eaves. The bell tinkled briefly. Almost sedately the bird hopped up the steps and nudged open the door of the shrine. He thrust his head inside, and after a brief moment, backed out, the tiny door swinging shut behind him. In his bill he had a folded piece of paper. Two quick hops landed him on a platform in the centre of the table where he dropped the paper.

Taro had been watching, fascinated. Everything had been done just as though Isobe were here. Now, what would the fortune say? He reached out a hand.

Angrily, the bird chirped and hopped possess-

sively on the paper. Taro drew back, 'Oh,' he said, laughing. 'I forgòt! Excuse me!' And he waited. As though his feelings had been hurt, the robin did nothing for several minutes. Then, ignoring Taro, he placed one claw on the paper and with his bill he tugged at a piece of string that fastened it. The paper unfolded and the bird with a gesture of finality shoved it to the floor. Then he hopped back to his stand where he preened his feathers.

'Good bird! Now, let me see — oh, no! First you must have your reward!' Taro offered a grain of a special kind of seed that Isobe kept for such treats, and allowed the bird to crack it before putting him back in his proper cage.

At last he picked up the fortune. It was simple and cheering. 'Your star is in the ascendancy,' it said. That is good, Taro thought. I wonder what another one would say.

So that was how he had spent the afternoon. Putting the birds through their paces and getting new fortunes.

'You will suffer business losses,' the next one read. Business? Now what could that mean?

'Now is the time to forward all plans for advancement; make new friends.' Well, Isobe was a new friend. 'Deal carefully with those who may be your enemies; venture not to attain your goals today; there is conflict in the stars.'

'Foolish birds!' cried Taro, 'why can you not agree?' And for the rest of the day he ignored them.

Isobé laughed when he came home that night, his money pouch swinging heavily from his girdle. 'Many people in Kamakura paid their money to see Yamagara perform today. To some few the fortunes were serious matters, but to most the cleverness of the bird is the main attraction. Had I known you would have taken them to heart I would have written nothing but cheerful ones and left them in the shrine.'

Taro's eyes widened. 'You — you wrote them?'

The old man laughed so hard his white beard quivered. 'But of course! How else would I get them?' Still twinkling he asked, 'You think it is not honest? But we must please the people, that is all they ask.' Abruptly his mood changed.

'But you have not asked about today, and there is real news!'

'Did Yoichi find work?' Taro asked eagerly.

'Indeed. My friend Shiba was happy to have found a boy to help him. We did not tell him what an expert Yoichi is. He is only Kato, the son of a friend's friend who needs the work.'

'But when he has enough money and leaves the swordsmith, will not Shiba-san be angry?'

'Perhaps,' shrugged Isobe. 'But I will appease him by giving him a free fortune — a good one!' Isobe leaned forward to light the charcoal fire. 'We will eat now, and then I must write more fortunes for tomorrow. Would you like to help?'

It was not until they had finished their evening meal and Isobe had started counting the coins he had taken in that day that he looked up at Taro in amazement.

'It is inconceivable that I should have forgotten,' he said, 'but Hara is in Kamakura as predicted. In fact, the young lord of the house gave me one of these coins. The bird charmed him, and he was lighthearted when he read his fortune.'

And now, on the second day of being alone,

Taro was thinking of these things, feeling a great restlessness. Anger and resentment surged over him when he thought of Hajime of Hara, a boy about his own age, free to enjoy himself at festivals, and be lighthearted about fortunes, the boy who now could claim the Honourable Sword, Amakuni-maru, as his own.

Taro felt a guilty flush when he thought of the sword he and Yoichi had sworn to recover. It might seem they had forgotten it, these past weeks. But I had not, he thought, nor had Yoichi, I am sure.

Slowly, there grew in his mind a perfect image of Amakuni-maru. It was as if it floated in the air in front of him, almost within his grasp, yet always out of reach. He saw the glistening black scabbard and the richly sombre purple and gold braid on the hilt. The sword was withdrawn from the sheath and, as always, Taro's breath went from him. It was like a path of moonlight on a motionless river, so gleaming was the blade. And like the moonlight when clouds cover the moon, the vision disappeared.

Taro took a deep breath and made a decision.

Hara and Amakuni-maru are very close. I will find the camp and hide, watching. Perhaps I can discover where the Honourable Sword is kept. Perhaps I can redeem it for the house of Yori.

He wasted no time in further plans. There was no telling how long he might be gone so he must take some food, and a blanket, for the autumn days were getting chilly. Leave a note for Isobe saying he would be away for a while and was all right. No need to say exactly where he was going. He propped the note against the old man's rice bowl. The birds had plenty of food and water, and Tashi, much against his will, was tied to a tree.

Taro started out to find Hara's camp.



THE CAMP might have been a magnet drawing Taro straight to it, for in less than an hour's walk he heard the noises of an army camp. A blacksmith clanged his hammer against his anvil; axes thunked into wood to make fuel for fires. There were smells too, chestnuts roasting, fish freshly caught in the ocean, sushi, and sweet wine.

Then through the trees he saw the encampment. There were large tents for the lords and Samurai, and sleeping mats for servants. Small, neat cooking fires dotted the compound. To the left of the camp was a large cleared area, the

jousting field for the warriors who dearly loved their tournaments.

Homesickness swept over him, for the scene was so like the camp sites at Yori. He wondered bitterly if he would ever again take part in the games, in the sumo matches, in which he was most inept, or in the archery contests, in which only a few Samurai could beat him.

But this was not the time for self-pity. He had to find a safe watching place. But why not just here? This clump of low-growing bushes in front of these sturdy trees made a snug hide-out. With only a little work he would have a perfect view.

Painstakingly and under cover of the camp noises he hacked out a few branches in the thick bushes. Now, when he was seated, he had a peephole at eye level. He spread his blanket over piled-up leaves for an almost too comfortable resting place. Then he settled down to wait.

Only a few servants were visible. Some were preparing food, while others swept the hard ground in front of their masters' tents with brooms of twigs. Here and there a man was bus-

ily working on the thick, woven armour of the Samurai. It was good protection against arrows, Taro knew, but breaks in the straw weaving were frequent and they needed constant repairing.

He nibbled a bit of the food he carried, and then, relentlessly, sleep closed his eyes.

Shadows were slanting when he awoke, stiff and a little chilly. He wrapped his blanket around his shoulders, wishing he could have a fire. Those he saw through the opening in the bushes were being fanned to bright flames that would soon die down to glowing coals just right for cooking.

Samurai wandered among the tents, talking,



joking, and occasionally indulging in horseplay. They were a swaggering lot, bold, boastful, and undoubtedly brave. No different, that Taro could see, from his father's Samurai. Except that they were his enemies. Except that they had killed his father.

A sudden stir around the central tent turned his attention from an impromptu wrestling match, and he drew his breath in sharply as he recognized the two figures standing in the entrance of the tent above which floated the purple and scarlet banners of Hara. He had seen these two often during the long siege on his father's castle. He had sighted them through the arrow slits in the beleagured walls, and had taken their measure down the length of his arrows, knowing even as the bow twanged that the distance was too great, and it would be only another arrow wasted.

Tokimasa stood with one arm upraised to catch the attention of his men, the other arm around the shoulders of his son Hajime.

They both wore voluminous trousers of patterned cotton — the father's were bright green

while the son's were blue — that fastened just below the knees, and matching long-sleeved blouses were tucked into the waistband. Over this Tokimasa wore a sleeveless robe of orange and black. It was caught at the waist with a sash, gathered in back, brought forward between his legs, and the ends tucked into the sash in front. Two swords, long and short, angled stiffly at his side. Both men wore peaked black caps.

'My lords!' Tokimasa shouted, waving them nearer. 'A friendly challenge has been issued and we call upon you to witness its outcome.' He waited, smiling broadly while the Samurai crowded around. Taro, in his hiding place, strained to hear.

A third man had been standing slightly behind the Daimio and his son. Now, when Tokimasa beckoned, he stepped forward and bowed. He was holding a helmet of polished steel, with two golden antlers ornamenting the front.

The Samurai were silent, eying the three figures expectantly.

'It is a challenge between my son and — but wait! Let him tell it!'

Hajime, flushing slightly, stepped forward. 'It is I who have issued the challenge to Kotetsu, our helmet maker,' he said in a clear voice, indicating the man holding the helmet. 'The honourable Sensei defends his helmets against the blow of any sword. I say that a good sword and a mighty blow will cleave his helmets in two. What say you, Samurai?' The young lord's voice rang out over the encampment.

For a moment there was silence — almost an uneasy silence as men hesitated to side against their master. Then:

'The helmet will withstand the blow!'

'The helmet saved my skull many a time!'

'The sword would be dulled against the helmet!'

Hajime held up both arms. 'Wait!' he shouted. 'Hear the rest! Before you place your wagers you should know. Such faith does the honourable Kotetsu have in the strength of his helmets that he has agreed that I strike the blow with the noblest sword in Nippon... the Amakuni-maru!'

Taro scarcely heard the tumult that greeted the announcement. Amakuni-maru! The fineness of

the finest was to be proved. And against a worthy opponent, for Kotetsu was unequalled in the making of helmets.

When his mind and eyes came into focus once more, Taro saw the nobles and Samurai forming a large circle in the centre of the jousting grounds. Behind them stood the servants, craning their necks for a view of the action.

Taro's vantage point served him well, for he was above the field, and the centre of attraction was in full view.

A wooden stand was being hastily but carefully erected. Though Taro could not hear the words now, it was apparent that the desired height of the stand must be level with the hips of Hajime. Several times the young man stood beside it, measuring, then stepped aside and made cutting motions with a weaponless arm as if gauging the distance. Kotetsu stood by, still holding the gleaming helmet.

At last the stand was ready, and Hajime and Kotetsu were alone on the field. The helmet maker placed the helmet in the centre of the stand, settling it firmly. Then he stepped back

and bowed deeply across the table to his young challenger. 'My helmet and I are ready to face the might of your sword.' There was formal dignity in his manner, but his eyes twinkled at the boy.

Hajime made even a deeper bow. 'I am ready, Sensei.' Then he wheeled and lifted an arm in signal.

A Samurai left his place beside the Daimio and came toward them. He carried at arm's length an unsheathed sword.

Amakuni-maru.

Only the Honourable Sword would be held so respectfully; only Amakuni-maru would glow in the setting sun like sparks from the fire that tempered it.



Hajime took the sword into his own hands. Holding it in front of him he faced the helmet, and he bowed. 'Amakuni-maru and I are ready,' he said.

He assumed a wide-spread stance, his bare toes curling into the ground. Both hands curved around the handle of the sword, clenching and unclenching, seeking the right hold. He began to breathe deeply, slowly, rhythmically. He raised the sword above his head.

Taro stopped breathing.

Hajime relaxed and lowered the blade, never taking his eyes from the helmet. Twice more the blade swung upward and dropped. Each time a breathless sound swept across the field.

Blood pounded in Taro's ears.

Hajime flexed his fingers and settled his feet more firmly and raised the sword.

'Wait!' It was a thin-voiced command from Kotetsu. His face was paper-white and perspiration glinted on his forehead. The twinkle was gone from his eyes. He strode forward. 'The sun,' he muttered, 'strikes it wrongly. It will be better thus,' and he touched the helmet.

Taro, breathing again, could not see that it had been moved.

Hajime was visibly shaken. His arms rose jerkily, poised an instant over his head and flashed downward.

Steel met steel with a reverberating clang. The helmet bounced in the air, then fell to the ground. The blade of Amakuni-maru was buried deep in the wooden table.

A Samurai ran forward and picked up the helmet. His shout brought the kneeling warriors to their feet.

‘Only a dent! A very small dent! The helmet is unharmed!’

A second Samurai seized the sword and pulled it from the splintered wood. Without touching the blade he examined the steel carefully. All sound died away as he raised his head and faced the Daimio.

‘There is a nick,’ he said, ‘a very small nick, but the sword is damaged! And who can repair the Amakuni-maru?’

Taro fell forward on his face and wept.



YOICHI gave a final swish with the broom, sending dust and particles of charcoal flying into the street. A fine thing to be doing, sweeping out the shop! He, the adopted son of the great Soga! He whose fingers tingled to express themselves in hammering out the hot steel! He who —

One moment, boastful one, he chided himself, how can it be otherwise when my identity must be kept a secret? How could Shiba-san know that his new helper could turn out finer blades than the ones hanging in his own shop? Yoichi looked at the swords on display. Good swords,

even fine ones, but not swords of greatness such as Soga had created. With a sigh of helpless resignation, Yoichi carefully replaced the broom in its accustomed corner and resumed his position of waiting before the closed door of the smithy.

From behind that door came sounds of hammer against metal, and the white-hot smell of steel. Yoichi could picture Shiba-san working: he would look like a giant bending over the glowing forge, and behind him, climbing the wall in silent mockery would be his giant shadow. The steel he held in the fire would flare redly, then become a blinding white. Hammer and fold the sizzling mass! Listen to it hiss when he plunges it into water! Heat and hammer and fold and cool . . . over and over again! How many times would Shiba-san do this to the forming blade? Did he know Soga's secret that eighteen times made swords of the greatest strength, but that as many as twenty-two times weakened the steel?

Yoichi bit his lips. He should not even think those secrets lest some demon read his thoughts, but he wanted to shout with joy because what he



feared he had forgotten was once more clearly in his mind.

He moved impatiently on his cushion. Would Shiba-san never need his help? Two hours had passed since he had begun work, although the preparations had started much earlier with the rituals observed by all swordsmiths. Shiba-san had eaten no meat the night before, nor would he until the blade was finished; he had rinsed mouth and hands to purify himself, and had hung the doorway of the smithy with sacred straw rope and folded paper symbols of cleanliness. And no one, save his assistant, would be allowed to enter the inner room until the sword was finished. These were ordinary precautions to prevent evil from entering the blade.

Surely Shiba-san would need more charcoal soon?

Now Yoichi thought about Taro. What had he been doing in the three days since they had parted? Yoichi was glad his friend had a chance to rest. It was hard to lose your family —

The door of the smithy opened and Shiba came out. His shoulders drooped and there was a gray pallor on his face.

'Shiba-san,' began Yoichi, jumping to his feet, 'you have need of me?'

'No.' The blacksmith sank upon a mat, blinking rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the daylight. 'No, the only need is in myself. The steel will not form for me. Tomorrow, perhaps. It is resting now, in a covering of clay. It will —'

'Only clay, Sensei?' There was surprise in Yoichi's voice.

'Of course not! A bit of powdered charcoal and water are added.'

'But do you not —' Yoichi flushed, then turned pale. 'N-nothing,' he stammered, turning away quickly and seizing the broom. 'I will sweep the smithy!' He entered the dark room



where the fire still glowed, and leaned against the door. He had almost divulged one of Sogasan's deepest secrets. No one else knew that a small bit of powdered limestone added to the other ingredients would prevent oxidation of the steel.

Weakly, Yoichi began sweeping.

It was mid-afternoon. Yoichi and Shiba worked in silence in the front room of the little shop. Yoichi was happy, for at last he had been entrusted with a sword. It was an inferior sword, to be sure, belonging to some minor nobleman in Kamakura who had brought it in to be cleaned of rust and spots. That fact alone earned him the contempt of Yoichi. No sword should be allowed to rust.

The quiet was broken by pounding horses' hooves sliding to a stop in front of the shop, rais-

ing a choking dust. Two Samurai dismounted. One strode toward the shop, the other grasped the bridle of a third horse, holding him as the rider jumped down.

The first soldier stood just inside the doorway. 'The Lord of Hara!' he announced, in a loud voice.

Yoichi dropped his work and bent over, forehead to the ground. It would be taken for an act of respect, but he was terrified, glad to hide his face. Suppose he was known by sight!

'You are Shiba, the swordmaker?' Tokimasa's voice was deep.

'I am, my lord.' Yoichi felt a movement as Shiba raised his head.

'And the other?'

'He is my assistant, called Kato, my lord.'

Yoichi winced as Shiba nudged him sharply, and reluctantly he lifted his head. Three pairs of eyes were fastened on him, and not the least sign of recognition! A quiver of relief rippled through him.

The Daimio held a sword toward Shiba.

'A blade to be repaired,' he said, 'but not an

ordinary blade. Perhaps you have heard of Amakuni-maru . . . Your assistant is ill, perhaps?’

Yoichi had unconsciously uttered a cry at the sight of the Honourable Sword, and then, aware of what he had done, began coughing and choking.

‘It — it is nothing, my lord,’ he managed to gasp. ‘A gnat, I think, in my throat.’ Tears grew in his eyes and his face was turkey-red with coughing.

The Daimio eyed him steadily for a moment, then turned back to the swordsmith.

‘You can repair it?’ he demanded. ‘The pay will be ample.’

Shiba was examining the sword with trembling fingers. ‘So beautiful, so beautiful,’ he murmured. ‘I never thought to see it.’ He raised his eyes to Tokimasa. ‘I do not know, my lord. It is . . .’

‘You are a maker of swords, are you not?’

‘Yes, my lord, but this . . .’

‘Then the repair should be a simple matter. It is only a small nick . . . I must have the sword in three days. See that it is done.’

The Daimio of Hara cast a last glance at Yoichi who was trying to slow his breathing; then he stalked from the shop followed by his Samurai. Dust churned again as they sped away.

Shiba looked up from his rapt examination of the blade. 'You! Why is it that you make such an exhibition? Are you no more than a peasant?'

'I am sorry, Shiba-san! I could not help it. I — oh, please let me see the Amakuni-marū!' He stretched out his hand.

'Do not touch the sword!' barked Shiba, thrusting Yoichi back. 'Even in its damaged condition it is peerless.'

'Can you repair it?' The boy did not take his eyes from the sword he had more than once been allowed to polish under Soga's guidance.

So long was the silence following his question that he turned to look at the smith.

Doubt, misery and something near to grief mingled in his face. He would not meet the boy's stare.

'You cannot mend it?' whispered Yoichi.

Shiba remained silent, his hands clenched

whitely on his knees.

Yoichi could hardly speak, so constricted was his throat.

‘Shiba-san, let *me* try!’

As though stung by a thousand hornets Shiba jumped. ‘You! You ask to touch — to repair, even! — the most beautiful sword in all Nippon? *You* ask that when I, maker of swords for a lifetime, fear to attempt it?’ His voice was shrill.

Again there was a long silence. Amakuni-maru lay between them glowing like a living thing.

Shiba began to mutter drearily. ‘I cannot, yet I must! In three days! And only today I could not forge the steel for my inferior swords!’ He covered his face with his hands.

Yoichi’s heart no longer jumped in his throat, and his mind worked calmly again. If he told his story and was allowed to repair the sword, he risked his capture as well as Taro’s. Yet, to have the Amakuni-maru mangled by a bungling hand . . .

He spoke carefully, in a tight, formal voice.

‘Shiba-san, listen and believe. I am not Kato, the son of a friend of Isobe’s friend. I am Yoichi,

apprentice and adopted son of Soga, swordmaker to Yori. My adopted ancestor forged this blade and his spirit has passed into my fingers. I can repair Amakuni-maru.'

Slowly the man's hands dropped and disbelief was on his face.

'It cannot be,' he said hoarsely. 'No boy could do such a thing.' When Yoichi made no reply, Shiba's look became crafty and his voice softened. 'Listen! If you are apprentice to Soga tell me this: how did the great one temper his swords? What was the temperature of the water in which he quenched the blade?'

Yoichi gasped. The last secret his master had told him, the one most cherished by the family, and now this, this mediocre one thought to worm it from him! Yoichi was very angry.

'To suggest such a thing is to insult the honourable profession of swordmaking! But this I will tell you: the iron you could not forge today, let *me* work with it and it will become the finest steel!'

He was aghast at his boastfulness. Soga-sensei would be disapproving, yet angry stubborn-

ness would not let him feel ashamed.

For a long time Shiba eyed him steadily. Then, 'Only a fool or one sure of himself would speak as you do. You must know you are risking your future as well as mine if you fail!'

To say nothing of Taro's, thought Yoichi. Then he smiled wryly as he heard the man's next words. 'Of course the Daimio must never know I did not repair it,' he said blandly.

'If I am successful, you mean?' demanded Yoichi, his temper rising again. 'Never fear, no one will know. Soḡa-san had no desire for fame; why should his son be different?'

He leaned forward and boldly, but respectfully picked up the sword. 'I must study the damage. I must compose my spirit. For this, I must be alone. Tonight, when the world is quiet and my body and mind are purified I will begin work. Please leave me now.'

The boy had become the master.

And Shiba, because he too was a swordmaker, could understand. Quietly he rose, bowed to the sword lying across Yoichi's arms, and left the room, sliding the door behind him.



YOICHI had been sitting in one position for a long time, and his knees were stiff as he rose to his feet. He placed Amakuni-maru, now wrapped in soft silk, in a corner cupboard. Then he extinguished the two torches that made a flickering island of light in the smithy and groped in darkness for the door.

He was tired but very happy.

In the outer room of the shop he was surprised to find Shiba still waiting, nodding over the hibachi, and with a quilted blanket around his knees. His head jerked up when Yoichi entered.

'The sword,' he exclaimed eagerly, 'how is it? Can you mend it?'

'Yes,' nodded Yoichi, smiling, 'it is only a matter of a little careful smoothing to retain the original curvature of the blade, and then the polishing.' He frowned. 'Three days! It should take at least a week to complete all of the twelve polishing steps, but —'

'It must be done as the Daimio commands,' insisted Shiba anxiously.

'It will be, never fear.' Yoichi's voice was grim. 'Now I must get some rest.' He turned to leave.

'Wait! Would you not be interested to know how it happened the sword was damaged? It was related to me by the friend of one who saw it.'

'Yes,' said Yoichi, 'I have been wondering.' He sank down on the other side of the fire and listened intently as the swordmaker, importance filling his voice, told of the challenge between Hajime and the helmetmaker.

At the end Yoichi nodded. 'I understand now. It was not because of a flaw in Soga's blade, but an imperfection in the spirit of those who would prove its worth. It was themselves they sought to honour. Perfection needs no reward.'

Shiba looked as though he did not understand.

'It may be that when Kotetsu touched the helmet the young lord was thrown off balance, and the blade fell badly.'

'It may be,' said Yoichi, dryly. 'I bid you goodnight, Shiba-san.'

He was a long time falling asleep that night, for there was a problem circling in his brain. Not about repairing Amakuni-maru. That could be done easily as he had told Shiba. No, the problem was how to keep the sword in his own possession. The only thing he could do would be to run away with it, to find Taro and the two of them would flee to the protection of the Shogun in Edo.

Was it stealing to run away with something that was really your own?

And when would he go? In three days the Daimio would come for the sword. He would work on it for two days in case someone called to see if the work was progressing. Then, very early on the third day he would leave, would go back to Isobe's to get Taro — if only he could get a message to him! — and one half of their vow would be kept . . . He fell asleep.

The chirpings of birds began to filter through the thin walls of the shop, and Yoichi, who had slept only a few hours, grinned to himself. 'I hope I did not waken you with my filing,' he said. 'But you are lazy birds to remain abed so long!' He squinted along the blade of Amakuni-maru, continuing to talk to the unseen birds. 'When you have work to do such as this, sleep is unimportant, as well as impossible!' With an emery stone he stroked the blade with long, careful motions. Once more he inspected it, and a wide, satisfied smile spread over his face. 'Are you watching, Sensei? You and our ancestors? Is it you who have guided my hand, allowing me to bring Amakuni-maru back to perfection?' He grew serious while he arranged in a neat row the equipment needed for polishing. 'I will not be able to finish the polishing before I leave the house of Shiba, but I swear it will be my first task once we are away from the danger of Hara.'

A knock at the door brought a slight frown. 'Yes?' he called.

The door slid open and Shiba poked his head inside. 'Good morning, young swordmaker,' he

said in a voice that was friendly, yet strange sounding. 'You were up early indeed. I have brought you rice —'

Food was the last thing Yoichi wanted, but he smiled and laid his work aside. 'Thank you, Shiba-san.' And suddenly he thought that perhaps food of any kind would be hard to come by after today. You had better eat well while you can, he told himself. He followed Shiba into the outer room.

'How does it go?' inquired the swordmaker pouring cups of tea for them both.

'Very well.' Yoichi had a mouthful of rice.

'The little nick, will it disappear?'

'I think so.' He sipped the hot tea. Why did he not tell Shiba the nick was already gone?

'Good! That is very good!'

For a moment there was only the faint clicking of Yoichi's chopsticks against his bowl.

'There is more news I heard last night,' Shiba announced suddenly. 'It concerns two boys who are sought by the Daimio of Hara.'

Yoichi sat frozen. So that accounted for Shiba's queer manner.

'One is the son of a conquered lord of Yori. The other is an apprentice swordmaker. There is a reward for their capture.'

Yoichi put down his empty bowl and looked steadily at Shiba. The swordmaker was contemplating the steaming depths of his cup of tea.

'Ah so?' said Yoichi, trying to keep his voice calm. 'A reward is a very fine thing to have.'

'Yes,' agreed Shiba, still not looking up.

'But,' continued Yoichi, 'would the Daimio give the reward to one who claimed to have repaired a priceless sword then it was known he did not?'

Shiba jerked his head up. 'You would not tell! You said no one would know!'

Yoichi helped himself to more rice. 'I hope not! I really hope no one ever needs to know!' was all he said. Inwardly he chuckled, keeping his face straight with difficulty. You are becoming skilful, he thought, in defeating Shiba-san! But do not let it go to your head. There is much to go wrong yet.

For two days he laboured over the Honourable

Sword. There were twelve steps in the polishing process and he had finished the first one in the early morning. The next five would consist of removing the marks left by the filing in the first stage. The blade would be rubbed with stones of increasing degrees of fineness until all marks were gone. The remaining steps involved smoothing the blade with fine paper, with cotton dipped in hot oil, and finally burnishing it with a steel pencil to give a mirrorlike gloss.

He was still on the second stage when again there was a knock on the door. 'Come in,' he called, and looked up to see Isobe's smiling face, while Shiba peered over his shoulder.

Though he had not seen the Bird Fortune-teller Man since the day he had come here, and although their acquaintance had been very short, Yoichi felt he was greeting an old and dear friend. He jumped up and bowed to the old man.

'It has been a long time since I have seen you. I am glad you have come.' He spoke the customary, formal words sincerely. And a thought came that made his heart pound: he could send a message to Taro through Isobe!

'Let us sit in the outer room,' he suggested. He wished Shiba would leave them 'but one cannot ask a man to leave his own shop. 'How is my friend Taro?' he asked when they were settled upon their cushions.

'It is mainly because of him that I stopped to see you on my way home,' answered Isobe.

'He is not ill?' Yoichi was alarmed. '

Isobe shook his head. 'I do not know. He acts very strangely.' When Yoichi would interrupt he raised his hand. 'Wait. Let me tell you. The second day after you left I found him gone when I arrived home. He had left a note saying he would be away for a while, that he would be all right. He did not return that night. But the next day he came back. He would not say where he had been. Indeed, he would say nothing. Only stare at space as though the world had deserted him. Sometimes he mumbles something I do not understand. "Ama — Ama — " he says. I do not understand!'

'Isobe-san! Did he say "Amakuni-maru"? Was that what he said?'

'It may be. He mumbles so.'

Yoichi was excited. 'It was — four days ago that he was away?'

The old man nodded.

'Then —' Yoichi sat back on his heels, his mind whirling. Taro must have gone — for some reason of his own — to Hara's camp. He might have seen the action during which the sword was damaged, and, if so, he would have no way of knowing how badly. No wonder he was upset! Yoichi leaned forward. 'Isobe-san, I believe I know what it is that makes Taro sad. And I can help him!'

The old man looked relieved. 'I am so glad! He will be happy to see you. I told him this morning I would try to bring you home tonight.'

'No, no, you do not understand. I cannot go tonight. I must work on — that is —' He caught himself as there was a quick movement from Shiba. 'That is, Shiba-san needs my help and I cannot leave —'

'But how can you help Taro, then?' Isobe was bewildered.

'Just a minute. Let me think!' Yoichi rose and walked to the door, thinking furiously and

staring at, without seeing, Isobe's wicker basket sitting beside the dusty road.

Isobe did not seem to know about the sword; Shiba must not know that he, Yoichi, planned to run away with it tomorrow. How could he send a message that only Taro would understand?

He absently rubbed an itching spot on his arm and at the same time heard a cheerful peeping sound. It was as though the healed cut on his forearm had itched, and the Fortune-telling Bird had chirped simply to help him solve his problem. He spun around.

'Isobe-san, *you* can help him! Give him a fortune! Let the birds perform for him!'

Isobe shook his head ruefully. 'He has no faith in my fortunes. You see, he has helped to write them!'

Yoichi's enthusiasm was only momentarily dampened. 'But — but tell him — tell him *I* wrote one, just for him! To amuse him since I cannot come home right away. Wait! I will write it.'

He dropped to his knees before a low table. 'With your permission, Shiba-san, I will use a

bit of paper and ink.' He pulled toward him an oblong black slate. Its surface sloped from top to bottom, forming a shallow trough where rim and bottom met. From a dish in a compartment at the top he poured a little water over the slate, then rubbed a stick of India ink over the wet surface, and the liquid gathered in the bottom of the slate. He found a piece of paper in the small desk, and a fine brush. For several minutes he stared at the paper and nibbled at the brush. Then, methodically, and with his tongue working nervously, he brushed spidery characters blackly on the paper.

'There!' he cried triumphantly, jumping up, but holding the paper carefully so the ink would not run, 'a fortune to cheer him! Listen to this: "The pledge is half done. Before next sunrise the White Waterfall and the Bronze Buddha will meet!"' He looked up from the paper, watching the two men carefully.

'What kind of fortune is that?' demanded Shiba. 'It is nothing but nonsense!'

Isobe laughed. 'Nonsense is good for one who is gloomy!' He eyed Yoichi thoughtfully. 'I will

give it to Taro. I think he will be glad.' He took the paper, creased it and thrust it in the fold of his kimono.

The stars were still bright as Yoichi tiptoed from the swordshop very early in the morning and pulled the door shut quietly. Shiba was not likely to hear a noise since he slept in the rear, but it was wise to be careful. He snuggled the securely wrapped Amakuni-maru under his arm.

The night had seemed endless. He had been too excited to work, but had to stay in the inner smithy pretending to do so. Several times sleep closed his eyes, but always anxiety jerked him awake. Would Taro understand his message? Would he meet him before sunrise at the statue of the Great Buddha in Kamakura, just as he had met him at the White Waterfall so long ago?

Finally the time had come for him to go, and now he stood in the dark, empty street, unsure of the direction. The first night with Shiba they had gone to the Shrine grounds where the statue stood, but Yoichi had paid no great attention to the turnings. To the right? Now left? He fol-

lowed his instinct blindly, more questions running through his mind. Would Taro know how to find the Buddha? Was he on his way now? Perhaps they would meet before they got there. Then they would hurry north as quickly as possible, would find the Shogun and —

‘Well, where does the young master think he is going this time of the night?’

Yoichi jolted to a stop to avoid a headlong collision with a burly Samurai. Fear froze his tongue.

‘You are setting out to seek your fortune, I suppose?’ The fellow was jovial. ‘But what is it you carry so carefully? From the looks it is a sword!’ He began to laugh and turned to call someone. ‘Jiro, see here! Here is one who would be a warrior! He carries a sword wrapped in silk!’

A second Samurai joined him. ‘Perhaps the lord of Hara can use him!’ and he, too, laughed. ‘At least, Ippo, if we take him in, his lordship will know we were guarding the camp faithfully! Here, you! Come back here!’ He seized Yoichi as the boy tried to dodge past him. ‘Oho! So

you do not wish to be caught? Is it because of the sword? Is it stolen? Come, let me see it!

'No! No! Let me go! It is mine!' Yoichi struggled frantically.

Jiro took the sword and thrust it into his sash. 'Perhaps. But I think the Daimio would be pleased to know that no one passed his guards. Get on, you!'

'Let me go! Let — me — go!' Yoichi fought desperately with his captors. Then Jiro had him by the shoulders and Ippo swept his feet from the ground, and he was being carried between them like a trussed animal.

'You see, we save you the trouble of walking!' laughed Jiro. 'I call this real style!'



TARO had been waiting by the statue of the Great Bronze Buddha for what seemed an eternity. Surely, it was nearly sunrise! Why did not Yoichi come? Had something happened to prevent his escape? Perhaps Shiba the swordmaker had realized what the 'fortune' meant and had caught him!

Taro grinned a little in the darkness, thinking of last night. He had been sunk deep in his blackest mood when Isobe came home. His family, friends, all his lands gone; the Honourable Sword damaged and in the hands of enemies; nothing was right with the world nor could it ever be again it seemed.

And then Isobe had come and given him the 'fortune' from Yoichi. At first the words meant nothing to the glum Taro, and with little interest he helped clean the fortune-telling stand. Then the old man, watching the boy keenly, and speaking very slowly, said, 'The pledge is half done. Before the next sunrise the White Waterfall and the Bronze Buddha will meet.'

Taro tried to seem amused. 'Yoichi has made a clever fortune. Perhaps he should help you write them.'

Presently Isobe said, 'There is no White Waterfall near the Great Buddha.'

'What?' asked Taro, who had been gazing into space. 'Oh!'

Another small silence. Then he said, 'No, the White Waterfall is near our home. We met

there, Yoichi and I, when —' He sucked in his breath. 'Isobe! Let me see the fortune! Where is it?' He grabbed the paper from the table where he had aimlessly dropped it. "The pledge is half done." The "pledge!" What —? Oh!

He saw a picture of two boys sitting on a river-bank. On the forearm of each was a streak of blood. 'I will revenge my family; I will redeem Amakuni-maru.' He heard both boys repeat the vow. Revenge was no nearer now, and the Honourable Sword was damaged. But wait! Perhaps it could be repaired! Hara would take it to a swordmaker in Kamakura. Did Yoichi —?

'The young apprentice was working in the inner room, alone, when I visited the shop,' Isobe said slowly as if reading Taro's mind.

'Did he say he was working on — on Amakuni-maru?'

'No. But the name was mentioned.'

'He has it! I know he has!'

Isobe, not entirely understanding, smiled at Taro's renewed energy.

'And "the White Waterfall and the Bronze Buddha will meet!"' Taro re-read in a puzzled

tone. "“White Waterfall” — we met there before. “Bronze Buddha,” Isobe, what is the Bronze Buddha?’

‘It is the great statue in Kamakura, almost four hundred years old, erected in memory of Yoritomo. Perhaps,’ the old man said hesitantly, ‘Yoichi means for you to meet him there as you did by the White Waterfall.’

‘Of course!’ shouted Taro so loudly that the birds twittered nervously. ‘And “before sunrise” . . . Isobe, I must make ready!’

Now he was here, close by the beautiful statue that was not too far from the spot where he had spied on Hara’s camp. But where was Yoichi? Gray dawn was breaking.

A sudden noise made him crouch deeper into the shadows; footsteps and voices getting closer.

‘Let me go! I have done nothing!’

‘He is a fierce one, eh, Jiro?’

Two Samurai came into view. Between them swung Yoichi, a protesting, struggling Yoichi. He nearly kicked one foot free.

‘Stop that now!’ Ippo bellowed, grabbing Yoichi more firmly around the ankles, ‘or we will

make you walk!' He and Jiro considered this very funny and shook with laughter.

They were passing Taro's hiding place.

Almost unconsciously his hand crept to the sword hidden beneath his blouse. The short sword his mother had given him. He pulled it out from its scabbard.

Now, they had gone by.

Taro sprang. Uttering the terrifying war cry





of Yori, he leaped upon the back of the Samurai, Jiro.

‘Yoichi! Seize their swords!’

Simultaneously Yoichi was dropped to the ground, and the soldiers whirled. Taro, in the act of plunging his sword, was thrown aside. Deftly he rolled away as the warrior lunged at him.

Yoichi was struggling with the one called Ippo, grabbing for the two swords sticking through his sash. One of the swords was Amakuni-maru.

Taro was on his feet, thrusting with his short sword, keeping his opponent off balance and unable to draw his own sword. All of the lessons he

had learned from his father's Samurai seemed to be engraved in his brain for him to read. He thrust downward as Jiro dived for him. A streak of blood appeared in the man's left palm.

Righting himself quickly, Jiro grabbed for his sword, uttering a mighty bellow as he succeeded in unsheathing it.

Taro, holding his short sword to thrust, shifted his grip rapidly and parried upward to ward off the blow of the long sword.

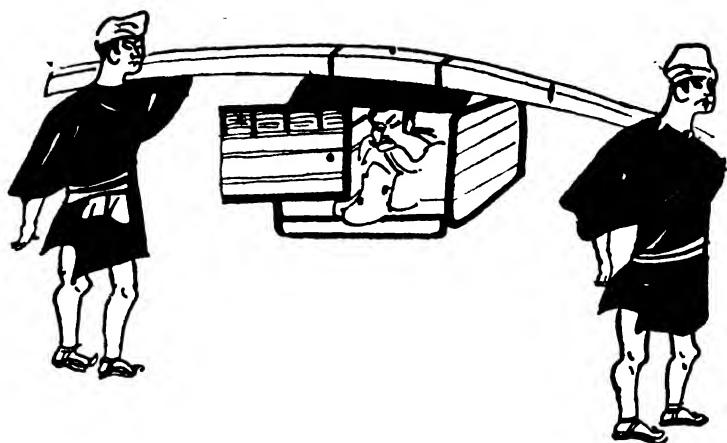
Yoichi pounded and thumped at Ippo who was sitting on his chest.

Taro, skilfully avoiding the slashing blade of Jiro, dodged inside or fell back out of reach.

But his short sword was no match for the Samurai sword. He was tiring, but doggedly flicked his sword down, pa^{re}ry —

'Stop! The Shogun Iyeyasu commands you to drop your swords!'

None of the four had heard anyone approaching. Now they were surrounded by armoured Samurai. A curtained sedan chair rested on the ground, its four bearers squatting on their haunches beside it. In the chair, leaning forward



through the parted curtains, was a man with scowling eyes and a drooping mustache. A velvet robe of rich dark blue covered him. A black peaked cap was on his head.

‘Up!’ He spoke abruptly, yet his voice was not



harsh. 'Up, and say why you are fighting.'

The four combatants, at hearing the first command, had dropped to the ground, bowing before the ruler of Nippon.

'You!' said the Shogun, motioning to the one called Jiro. 'Speak!'

'Your Excellency,' began Jiro, trying not to stammer, 'we, Ippo and I, were on patrol, guarding the lord of Hara's camp, when this one,' he jabbed a finger at Yoichi, 'resists our questioning. We think he has a stolen sword, and we are taking him to the camp when this one,' he shook his head perplexedly at Taro, 'jumped from nowhere. It was very sudden, Your Excellency!'

Taro's head popped up. 'My lord,' he began, 'I —'

'Silence!' snapped the Shogun. 'You do not have permission to speak!'

Taro slowly lowered his head and the Shogun gazed at him curiously. 'Later you will be heard,' he said, in a kinder tone. 'You seem very young to battle with such warriors as these.'

Eagerly Taro sat upright again. 'Your Excellency, I —'

'Be still!' roared the Shogun. 'We have been travelling all night. This is no time or place to hold a court!' He motioned to his soldiers. 'Keep all four under guard.' To his bearers he said, 'Proceed to where we will camp. We are hungry and would have our breakfast.'

Taro and Yoichi knelt stiffly in front of Shogun Iyeyasu and his Court. The Shogun sat cross-legged on a red velvet cushion, a gold-trimmed purple robe protecting him from the cool breeze. Around him were his retinue of nobles, richly dressed in silks and velvets of brilliant colours. Behind them sat the Samurai, in full armour, their corselets of red or orange woven straw appearing almost dull beneath the golden antlers branching from their steel helmets.

At the right of the Shogun's retainers was the Daimio of Hara and his followers. Young Hajime sat beside his father.

Commoners and servants ringed the field. This promised to be more entertaining than a mere festival.

Two days had passed since the boys had fought

so desperately for their freedom and lost. During those two days they had been closely guarded in a tent at the edge of the Shogun's camp, guarded and fed, but apparently forgotten by Iyeyasu. Their questions were answered impatiently by their guards. 'His Excellency made the long journey from Edo to Kamakura for the purpose of worshipping at Yoritomo's grave, and enjoying the festival. Why should he be bothered with petty thieves?'

But now, on the last day of the festival, the Shogun had called an assembly of all the feudal lords and Samurai gathered in Kamakura. The two young prisoners were brought in. Court musicians silenced the crowd by beating wooden clappers together.

A black-robed man rose from his position behind the Shogun, prostrated himself before the ruler, and, still kneeling, unrolled a parchment and began to read:

'For five hundred years the land of Nippon has been a land of war and strife. War lords have conquered war

lords, only to be themselves overcome by other war lords. A warring nation is a weakened nation. We must have peace to grow strong. To have peace we must return to the cultivation of the soil; to the development of art and literature; and physical skill and courage in tournaments and contests must flourish. Hear, then, this proclamation of His Excellency, Iyeyasu, Shogun of all Nippon: As of this day all warring shall cease, and all the population shall live in peace and harmony with one another. Let this proclamation be read the length and breadth of the land and let all men comply.'

Taro's head swam as he tried to believe his ears had heard aright. In one short proclamation the vow he had made to avenge his family became impossible to fulfill. How can one take revenge on one's enemies except by waging war? What else is there for Noblemen and Samurai except war? What —?

Again came the signal for silence. The tumult that had swept the field died away, and Taro became aware that all eyes were focused on him and Yoichi. Their trial had begun.

The Shogun himself was conducting the in-

quiry. His first words were directed at a trembling Yoichi. 'How is it,' asked the Shogun, 'that the men of Hara saw two boys plunge into the river and perish, yet they say you are the ones they were pursuing?'

Taro's eyes widened. Apparently they had not been forgotten during the two days imprisonment: it was obvious the Shogun had been familiarizing himself with the case.

Yoichi's voice was steady when he answered. 'We did not plunge into the river, Your Excellency. We crossed the Sacred Bridge — under it, Your Excellency!' he said hurriedly as a startled gasp rose from the crowd, and the Shogun's bushy eyebrows met in a frown. 'We crossed under the bridge, on the braces. I would not have dared, but my friend Taro of Yori, is afraid of nothing!'

'Taro of Yori,' mused Iyeyasu, almost to himself. 'The Daimio of Yori was my friend. I regret the feud that cost the lives of him and his family.' The Shogun's eyes flickered briefly toward Hara, then fastened again on Yoichi.

'So you persist that you are the swordmaker

apprentice to the great Soga, and this boy is the heir to Yori?’

‘Yes, Your Excellency.’

Iyeyasu leaned forward and picked up a sword that lay on a black cushion before him. ‘This sword. Do you know it?’

‘It is Amakuni-maru, Your Excellency.’

‘It is the sword you were carrying when you were captured.’

‘Yes, Your Excellency.’

‘You have stolen the sword from the shop of Shiba, the swordmaker?’

Momentarily Yoichi hesitated. ‘I was keeping my vow to return the sword to the house of Yori.’

‘But there is no house of Yori now.’

‘*There* is the house of Yori, Your Excellency!’ Yoichi pointed firmly at Taro, while again the people gasped. This was sheer defiance.

The Shogun replaced the sword on the cushion. His face was blank. The spectators, who had expected loud and angry accusations, were disappointed. Iyeyasu’s voice remained calm.

‘You, who call yourself Taro of Yori, what was the name of the Daimio of that house?’

‘My father was Imiki, my lord.’

As Taro answered he noticed a stirring in Hara’s side of the court. From the corner of his eye he saw Hajime lean forward and whisper to his father. A pleased expression came over Tokimasa’s face, and catching the attention of the Shogun, he bowed low.

‘My lord of Hara wishes to speak?’ inquired Iyeyasu.

‘My lord,’ said Hara, smiling, ‘my son has suggested a way to prove the identity of this boy. The real heir to Yori was an expert marksman with the bow and arrow. My son, who is also skilful would challenge him!’

An approving murmur went up from the crowd. A tournament would be a crowning touch to this day.

The Shogun pondered. He seemed to be studying Taro. Then he said abruptly, ‘What is your wish, Taro of Yori?’

He raised a hand against the mixed protests and cheers, and smiled warmly at Taro. ‘You are surprised, my son, that I should recognize in you the likeness of my friend Imiki of Yori? This

formality was necessary, but I never doubted. And your friend Yoichi, "the surplus one", is accepted in his true identity!

Both boys touched their foreheads to the ground and could only say, 'Thank you, Your Excellency!'

'And now, young Taro, what do you say to the challenge of Hara? It will be an honourable contest; and a fitting close to the day.'

Taro turned his gaze toward Hajime and his father. His enemies, responsible for the death of all that was dear to him. And he was being asked to engage in a friendly tournament — to please the Shogun and the people!

The crowd grew restless as Taro and Hajime exchanged expressionless stares. Finally Taro faced the Shogun, rolling up his sleeve, exposing his forearm.

'Your Excellency,' he said pointing to the small scar, 'here is proof of the vow I took to revenge my family against the house of Hara. Now, the decree against war frees me from my vow. But the honour of my ancestors is not so easily satisfied. I accept the challenge of Hajime of Hara.'

Should I win, I can rightfully take my place as lord of Yōri. If I lose, whatever lands Your Excellency sees fit to restore to me will be his, and his will, my will.'

There was complete silence by the time the boy finished his speech. Shogun Iyeyasu nodded briefly and gravely.

'Well said, young Yori. It will be as you wish. But one more thing.' He motioned toward Amakuni-maru lying on the black velvet cushion, and looked at Taro then Yoichi. 'You have sought to recover the sword with no thought of peril to yourselves. For such valour the Honourable Sword is restored to the house of Yōri. That is my decree.'

The boys bowed again, but only Taro could hear Yoichi's whisper: 'Do not hesitate, or I shall regret the decision we made!' They lifted their heads and Taro spoke.

'Your Excellency, when my father saved the swords from the fire he said a true thing: "They are part of the heritage of Nippon." Now, it is my wish to honour my father's words. Your Excellency, to you and to my country I give Amakuni-maru!'



THE WOODEN CLAPPERS signalled the end of the Court. At once, preparations for the tournament began. Mats were spread on the east side of the field for the noblemen, while commoners scrambled for positions at the ends.

The archery contest, called Yabusame, was a

game of antiquity. The soldiers of Yoritomo had played it on this same field some four hundred years before.

Five targets, twelve-inch squares of wood on top of high poles, are placed at regular intervals the length of the four-hundred-yard field. The contestants, gathered at one end of the field, and dressed in elaborate brocade costumes, hold their spirited horses with difficulty. The crowd quiets as the starters raise conch shells to their lips; three blasts, and the first horseman breaks from the starting line in a furious gallop. 'Haiy-o-o!' he shouts, guiding the horse with his knees and fitting his first arrow into the bow. A hit! The target shatters! The rider gallops on, another arrow hisses through the air. Five times, then back to the starting post at high speed, raising his bow in response to the acclaim of the spectators. It is a stirring thing, no matter the number of targets scored. To make all five is a rare achievement.

New targets are set up, and the next rider silently invokes his ancestors to send his arrows true.

This was the ordeal facing Taro. Only a few

months ago he had taken his turn gladly with his father's Samurai, triumphant when three targets shattered. Now it was more than a game; this was for honour and his future.

He and Yoichi found themselves surrounded by Samurai, minor noblemen and servants.

'My lord,' said one nobleman, bowing before Taro. 'His Excellency offers you clothes and standard-bearer, suitable for your rank and the occasion.'

'His Excellency gives you the choice of his finest horses.'

'His Excellency sends you his personal bow and arrows.'

Taro was flustered and suddenly nervous. He was conscious of his tattered clothes, of his youth, and of the task before him.

'Thank His Excellency,' he said, louder than was necessary, hoping to keep his teeth from chattering. 'The horses and bow and arrows I must accept, but the clothes I wear will serve until I prove my rank, and I must earn the right to have a standard bearer.'

'Taro! Look! Isobe has come to wish you

good fortune!' The excited call from Yoichi swung Taro around. He saw his friend tugging at the arm of the old man, urging him forward.

'But he is famous now,' Isobe was protesting, 'and I am only a Bird Fortune-teller Man.'

'And my friend forever,' said Taro, coming to him. 'If you had not taken us in, none of this would have happened.' He paused and shook his head ruefully. 'But perhaps I am sorry it did happen!' He lowered his voice and leaned toward his two friends. 'Listen, I must confess to you — I am frightened!'

Yoichi snorted. 'Of what? Are you not the champion archer of Yori? Did you not beat —?'

'Listen again! How long since I have held a bow in my hand? Since the siege, when my human targets would not come within range! How long is it since I have played at Yabusame? Since before the siege began! Your arm grows stiff and your eye less keen if you do not practice. That is why I am frightened!'

But Yoichi would share none of his worries. 'You will win! Hara cannot defeat Yori twice!'

Isobe chuckled. 'Why do you not ask me

what will happen? Am I not the fortune-teller?’

‘You would tell my fortune perhaps, with one that I helped to write?’ Taro threw back his head and laughed. ‘No, thank you, Isobe-san! Some of those ‘fortunes’ I remember too well! Besides, Yamagara is not with you.’

‘No, I left him in care of the roast-potato vendor when I heard what was happening. But — but I think,’ he began fumbling in the folds of his kimono, ‘I think I just happen — yes, here it is! Would you read it, my young master?’

Taro unfolded the paper and grinned. ‘Isobe-san, the ink is still wet!’ Silently he read the fortune, his face sobering, then he read it aloud. ‘“Like the flight of a plumed arrow, a stout heart and a strong arm chart your destiny!”’ He looked at the old man. ‘It is a good fortune. No matter what the outcome of the contest, I will remember it.’

Taro was mounted on a spirited chestnut mare. On his back, contrasting strangely with the faded and torn peasant’s blouse, was a richly embroidered sheath bristling with fine arrows. The bow he held in his left hand was made of the finest

catalpa wood, with narrow strips of bamboo on either side and all wound with gold and silk thread. It felt good in his hand.

He was testing it experimentally, when Yoichi touched him on the leg.

'Here comes your challenger,' whispered the young swordmaker.

Taro looked and gasped in amazement.

Hajime of Hara, riding a prancing white horse, was wearing clothes as plain and simple, if a bit neater, than Taro's. And no embroidered saddle nor silken tassels decorated his horse. Only by the number of retainers and the purple and scarlet banner did he proclaim his rank.

He pivotted his horse to stand beside Taro. They exchanged the slightest of bows, and then a long, slow smile passed between them.

'You do me an honour,' Taro stammered, not knowing just the thing to say.

The other boy shrugged. 'There is more freedom in these clothes,' was his answer.

'They are ready!' Taro heard Yoichi say. 'Good luck, Yori!' He darted back into the crowd to stand beside Isobe.

It was customary for the challenger to ride first

Three scarlet-robed starters raised the conch shells to their lips; there was one unmusical blast, two, and when the third died away, there was only a spurt of dust where the white horse had been.

'Hary-o-o!' Hajime screamed, the traditional cry. The first target smashed:

Set, aim, shoot! A second hit.

The white horse seemed to be flying.

The steel-tipped shaft missed the third target.

A hit on the fourth.

Hajime's hands worked smoothly, the bow bent, the fifth target was in sight . . . a miss!

Three out of five. Good! The crowd cheered wildly as the boy and horse galloped past and pulled up, rearing, at the starting post.

The targets were rapidly being replaced and the starters waited. Taro nodded briefly to the panting Hajime. 'It was good,' he said. Then the conch horns sounded.

'Haiy-o-o!' The brown horse surged forward, Taro's finger found an arrow, his eyes found the

target. It blurred in his sight and the first arrow sailed free!

The second arrow was dead centre.

The third arrow thunked into the target.

No! Before the fourth left his bow he knew it was not good.



Steady! The mare flattened out. Steady! Taro pulled . . . He heard a great shout from a hundred throats. The fifth target was gone.

For Yori and Hara the game had ended in a draw.

Clamour from the excited throng mounted skyward, but Taro was unaware of it. His eyes were on Hajime of Hara who had left the starting post and was slowly walking his horse down the centre of the field toward Taro.

Taro quieted his rearing horse and matched his pace to that of Hajime.

Now the crowd was still. Steadily the distance between the two young lords lessened, and with each step something that had been hard and cold inside of Taro began to melt. Only a few more paces and he and Hajime would be face to face. Taro took a deep breath and knew that his vow and revenge were unimportant. He had found something better.

As though by a signal the right arms of the two boys raised up and out. Their fingertips touched, but not a word was said.

Somewhere, someone let out a chilling whoop. 'Haiy-o-o!' The shout was taken up by the hundreds of spectators.

Taro and Hajime broke into triumphant laughter, and the brown and white horses reared. Their riders crouched low in the saddles, and

neck and neck they raced to the end of the field. Wheeling they charged back into the cloud of dust they had just raised. Then, an abrupt turn in the centre of the field, and the two new friends, flushed and still laughing, bowed before the Shogun and his tumultuously applauding court.

The autumn typhoon blew and winter snows fell on Nippon. Then came the cherry blossoms and it was spring.

A peasant was planting rice. His two daughters were helping him. Kato straightened his back and said, 'Your mother is calling. Let us see what has happened.'

Yukiko met them halfway to the house. 'See! A messenger has left this. Read it, my husband!'

Kato unrolled the paper.

' "May the blessing of thy ancestors be upon thee and thy family who have done a service to the house of Yori" ' he read. ' "For the friendship that is between the houses of Hara and Yori, you are hereafter freed of the yearly tax of one third of your rice yield. This I do decree. Tokimasa of Hara." ' '

Kato looked sheepishly at his wife: 'I am not worthy of such fortune,' and he put his arms around Taeko and Matsu.

A woman spreading the winter bedding in the sunshine was startled when a travel-stained messenger leaned from his horse and dropped a package at her feet. 'From my lord of Yori, and Yoichi, swordmaker to the Shogun. You served them well.' He galloped on.

With trembling fingers she opened the package. A large square of silk tumbled out, scarlet, and gilded with the crest of Yori. And this? It was a lacquer rice bowl, as deeply brown as velvet and ornamented with a golden sword. It was filled to the brim with golden coins.

Isobe laughed gently when the weary messenger delivered his message. 'Come into my house and rest, my friend,' urged the old man, 'before you take my thanks to the lord of Yori. But the young master knows my answer. His castle would be much too fine for us. The birds, nor Tashi, nor I would be content away from our humble home. But tell my lord this: the old man

'is always here, with fortunes waiting to be written. And if he would come, so too must Yoichi . . . especially Yoichi, for indeed, I think his fortunes are the best!'

Taro leaned his head against a rock warm from the summer sunshine. 'I think the worst moment was when we saw the Sacred Bridge and knew we could not cross!'

Yoichi did not answer for a moment. The White Waterfall pounded over the rocks nearby, and though the trees gleamed the tiles on the roof of the new castle. Finally he said, dreamily, 'For me, the worst moment was thinking I had forgotten Soga's secrets!'

'But you had not,' said the lord of Yori.

'No. I had not.' Yoichi tossed a pebble into a small pool, and watched the ripples spread over its smooth surface until they reached the edge and tumbled over the falls.

GLOSSARY

of Japanese words not explained in the text

| | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Hibachi:</i> | charcoal-burning stove |
| <i>Obi:</i> | sash worn with kimono |
| <i>Okusan:</i> | Mrs, Madame, lady of the house |
| <i>Otoosan:</i> | Father |
| <i>Sumo:</i> | Japanese wrestling |